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OR, PITLESS AS DEATH.

BY ALBERT W. AIKEN,
AUTHOR OF "THE ACE OF SPADES," "JOE
PHENIX, THE POLICE SPY," "THE FRESH
OF FRISCO," ETC. ETC.

CHAPTER I.

ONE FOR ALL AND ALL FOR ONE.

MERRILY clinked the glasses, merrily bubbled the wine from the long-necked bottles and loud rung the laughter.

Three young men, seated in a large attic room in one of the old-fashioned houses near the stage door of the Boston theater on Mason street in the ancient metropolis of New England.

Odd young men in an odd, old room and in an odd locality.

Mason street is a little tiny street situated between the two principal thoroughfares of Boston, Washington and Tremont, and running parallel with them.

It is one of the old streets, hardly wide enough for any one to swing a cat in, and the sidewalks

"MISERABLE WOMAN!" CRIED CROWNINGSIELD, THE SLEUTH, "YOU HAVE DESTROYED YOURSELF. I DETECTED YOUR PURPOSE AND CHANGED THE GLASSES!"

run in some parts of it almost too narrow for two people to walk abreast.

A stranger would never be apt to find the street without a guide, although it is in the very heart of the city, and to the wayfarer who leaves the bustle and din of either Washington or Tremont street, it is like going from a ball-room into a graveyard, for all is quiet and still. Being so centrally situated, though, Mason street and Avery its neighbor, and from which it runs are in high repute with men who desire accommodation near to the city's heart.

And this large garret to which we introduce the reader was the meeting room of three of the greatest friends and jolliest boys to be found in all of our Modern Athens.

The Three Bloods they were termed and well they sustained the name.

They were all scions of old Boston families, as the reader will see who is familiar with the leading lights of ancient Shawmut, sitting upon her three hills, as proudly as the seven-hilled mistress of the world by the side of Tiber's yellow flood.

One was a tall, well-built fellow, with yellow locks and eyes of blue, a spiritual face, with a dreamy expression ever upon it.

This was Howard Crowningshield, an orphan, without much property of his own, but the presumptive heir to an uncle who was one of the richest men in the State.

The young man had chosen to be an artist, much to the disgust of his uncle who was of a very practical turn of mind, having amassed his money in the West India trade.

He insisted that the boy ought to go into the busy marts of commerce, rather than waste his time fooling with a mess of paints and a lot of brushes.

The boy obeyed; under the circumstances the wish of such an uncle was law.

But the experiment was a failure; the old and conservative firm with whom the boy was placed informed Captain Crowningshield, as he was always termed, that the lad, although obedient, respectful, diligent and willing was not in the least adapted for a merchant's life, and that as he seemed to have a marvelous aptitude for drawing—he had adorned the books of which he had been put in charge with a multitude of figures, more or less ornamental—in their judgment it would be best to let him have his own way, and their recommendation was that he should be sent to study for an artist.

The captain was an extremely stubborn man and liked to have his own way, but he was not idiotic in his stubbornness and when he became satisfied that Howard would never make anything but a very poor merchant, while he might turn out to be a genius in the artistic line, consented to let him have his own way.

The second one of the three was as great a contrast to the first as can well be imagined, being short and stout, with dark hair and eyes and a round, rosy face.

He was known as Gordon Endicott and was in training for the law.

The third was tall and thin, a lath-like young fellow, with reddish hair and a hatchet-like face which always wore an extremely solemn air.

He was called Washington Winslow and was a medical student.

The room wherein the three sat was plainly furnished as far as the furniture went, but it was filled with a strange jumble of all sorts of things.

Each of the three friends was represented by articles appertaining to their chosen profession.

There were the easel and some pictures, more or less unfinished, of the artist.

A dummy figure, life-size, with a collection of wardrobes scattered around it, showing that, like what the Great Bard says of man, the dummy in his time "plays many parts."

A king, a clown, a Roman gladiator, a gentle shepherdess, Venus, goddess of love, and Satan, prince of darkness.

Just now the dummy was fantastically attired in a royal robe, with one hand folded to his breast and the other extended in a commanding way, but upon his brow, a dilapidated silk hat had been placed, and in the orifice intended to represent his mouth an extremely long cigar was stuck.

Right opposite to him, on the other side of the old table, at which the boon companions sat, was the medical student's representative, a mounted skeleton, grotesquely dressed in the white clown dress of the French Pierrot, with its arms raised above its head, which was surmounted by the usual conical hat, and one foot advanced as if it was about to glide off into the dizzy mazes of the galop.

Between the teeth of the skeleton was placed a short pipe, the duduine, dear to the heart of the son of the Emerald Isle.

The lawyer was represented by a pile of old law books, and on a large canvas was a rude sketch done in charcoal representing Endicott attired in the robes of a judge engaged in the task of hanging a donkey by means of a rope passed over the limb of a tree.

But as the beast was standing on its hind legs, pulling back with all its might, the chances seemed favorable that the donkey would succeed in running the man up to the tree, rather than suffer by the rope himself.

Then there were boxing-gloves, and pieces of armor, fencing-foils, swords and whips, and all sorts of comic articles such as young men in the full flush and heyday of their youth love to collect around them.

Upon the table around which the young men sat, a "banquet" was spread.

There were crackers and cheese, and the half of a boiled ham, a plate of pigs' feet and a bottle of pickles, and for drinkable they had the genuine article, and no mistake.

Three quart bottles of champagne, and they were pledging each other in right royal fashion. It was a gala night, for that day the young artist had won his spurs.

One of his pictures, which had been placed in the annual exhibition, had been purchased by a gentleman reputed to be about the best judge of paintings in America for a thousand dollars and a commission had been given to paint a companion to it for another thousand.

And when it became known that the great man had pronounced the young artist to be one of the rising painters of the day, there were a dozen anxious to possess specimens of his skill.

"Success to you, Howard, old boy!" exclaimed Endicott, as he poised his glass in the air. "Here's to the future great artist of America!"

Crowningshield modestly attempted to remonstrate against the term, but his companions would not listen to him and the toast was drank with due honors.

"Well, Howard, you have been the first to clutch the 'bubble reputation,' but I trust that Gordon and myself will have the luck to follow hard upon your heels.

"It's deuced odd, boys, when you come to look at it to think how much alike all our situations are.

"We three bear as good names as all New England can boast, and yet none of us have the necessary wherewithal to support our names as they ought to be supported.

"You, Crowningshield, are squinting toward your uncle's wealth; I have an aunt—a maiden aunt—who promises that if I am a good boy the family wealth shall be mine; while you, Endicott—"

"Have a cousin—an aged cousin!" interrupted the lawyer student, "who rolls in wealth galore, a confirmed old bach, an invalid too, who fancies that he has all the diseases under the sun, so it is not likely he will ever marry and I am to be his heir if I succeed in making a name at the bar."

"Aha! Alcibiades!" this was Endicott's nickname—exclaimed Winslow. "When I get my sheepskin introduce me to your ailing relative and I'll give you a commission on what I make out of him."

"What? Do you think I'd speculate on my own flesh and blood? Do you take me for a modern Shylock?"

"Peace, gentle friends," interposed the artist. "Listen to me. To my lot has fallen the first prize in the lottery of life, and be it my task then to recall to your memories the compact we made when we first took possession of these halls of dazzling light some three years ago.

"Three friends like the world-famous guardsmen of Dumas, we took a similar oath to that they swore.

"We pledged ourselves to a common future."

"One for all and all for one," exclaimed the law student.

"Drink to our brotherhood," cried young Sawbones.

Again the glasses were drained.

"The first chance is thine," theatrically continued Winslow. "Your uncle's favor is secured, and I suppose the next thing will be a match between you and the wealthy Hancock girl, the pride of Beacon street."

CHAPTER II.

A CONFESSION.

"OH, no, no," replied the artist in considerable confusion.

"Oh, yes, yes!" cried the other two.

"Come, old fellow, own up; there's no use of attempting to deceive such sharp fellows as we are," the lawyer asserted.

"Doesn't everybody that knows anything about the matter at all know that you and Miss Letitia Hancock, only daughter of the late Judge John Hancock, whose signature stands out above all the rest in the Declaration of Independence, and the heiress of a million or two in her own right, have been on the most intimate terms ever since you were children?"

"Doesn't the lady think that there never was such an artist since the days of the old masters, as a certain young gentleman whom I will at present refrain from naming?"

"Doesn't she show that, by long odds, you are the favorite in the race for her affection, and between you and the rest of your would-be rivals it is as the English sport said when he declared he could place every horse in the race, Eclipse first and the rest nowhere?"

"Oh, there isn't the least bit of use of your attempting to deny it," the medical student asserted.

"In this case it is the story of the Sultan in the Eastern tale over again. All you have to

do is to throw your handkerchief and the lady is yours. I know that your uncle approves of the match, for he as good as told me so last week.

"That was before your picture took the town by storm, too.

"Howard is a very good artist, I suppose," your worthy uncle said. "At all events his pictures please me, but then I don't pretend to set myself up as a judge of that sort of thing, but they don't seem to sell. I suppose that is because he hasn't been lucky enough to make what they call a hit, but I think I know where he could secure a prize with very little trouble if he would only try for it."

"I suppose you refer to some young lady," I ventured to remark.

"Exactly; and if he had any eyes in his head he could have seen how the wind stood two or three years ago.

"They were brought up together, have always been playmates, and I am sure that if he took the trouble to open his mouth the girl could be had for the asking; and she's worth a couple of million, too. Wouldn't it be better to try for such a wife as that than to be wasting his time daubing old canvases that no one seems to want to buy?"

"He's changed his mind in regard to that since I got the thousand for the single picture," responded Crowningshield, gayly.

"But, gentlemen, to tell you the honest truth, my uncle and everybody else who thinks as he does, are wrong about the matter," he continued.

Miss Hancock is a charming girl; not so beautiful, possibly, as to set the whole world raving about her, but still a fine-looking girl, and a perfect lady in every respect.

"A girl that would make any man a good wife, if she didn't have two dollars to her name instead of two million; but, boys, she is not for me."

A chorus of dissent arose from the others, but the artist implored silence with a wave of his hand.

"Patience, and hear me to a close," he said. "Letitia and I are like brother and sister, and I do not believe that she ever looked upon me in any other light."

Again there was a chorus of dissent, and again Crowningshield imposed silence.

"Never mind whether my idea is correct or not; let it pass, for it does not matter.

"Gentlemen, I am about to confide a secret to you; a secret which this evening, just before coming here, I revealed to my uncle."

The others stared in amazement. "I can't very well marry Miss Hancock or Miss anybody else, without running the risk of being prosecuted for bigamy, for I am already married."

"Married!" exclaimed the two young men.

"Yes, gentlemen, married, and have been for nearly fifteen months," Crowningshield replied with a beaming smile.

"And what is more, I am the father of as pretty a boy baby as moves on the surface of the wide earth this day."

"Oh, this is high treason!" cried the medical student, helping himself to another glass of champagne.

"Howard, you have grossly abused the confidence we placed in you!" declared the other with a solemn shake of the head, following Winslow's example and attacking the wine.

"Boys, it was just like a romance; give me your attention and I'll tell you all about it," Crowningshield said with the happy face of an innocent child.

"Proceed!" exclaimed Winslow.

"Prisoner, your defense; and remember you are to tell the truth, the whole and nothing but the truth—"

"Oh, give us a rest!" cried young Sawbones irreverently.

"You shall have the tale complete," the other assured them. "I will nothing extenuate, nor set down aught in malice"; that's it, isn't it, or something pretty near?" he said, appealing to the lawyer, who was the best posted man of the three.

"Oh, hang your quotation! go on and give us your original matter; that is the meal for which we hunger," Endicott answered.

"One night, just about eighteen months ago, I went to Cambridgeport to make a call.

"About ten o'clock I started to return home and as it was an extremely pleasant night I determined to walk.

"Nothing occurred on the way worthy of mention until I came to the bridge, and then I noticed a slight, girlish figure ahead of me and the queer movements of the woman, or girl, whichever she was, attracted my attention.

"She would stop every now and then, gaze over the railing at the water, apparently talk to herself for a few moments, and sometimes put her foot upon the lower rail as if she had an idea of climbing up on it.

"When I noticed her acting in this peculiar way, I loitered behind purposely for I was afraid that she intended to commit suicide and I made up my mind to prevent her.

"There wasn't a soul on the bridge, either

coming or going, so the girl and I had it all to ourselves.

"She went on until she came to the draw where the piers jut out into the water; she climbed from the bridge down onto the left hand pier, walked clear to the end of it and there paused, gazing intently down upon the moving tide.

"I felt certain now that she intended to make the leap and so quietly stole up behind her.

"Oh, Heaven!" she said, communing with herself, "how dark and terrible looks the inky flood, but in its close embrace there is eternal peace, eternal rest!"

"And then, extending her arms, she jumped—"

"And you caught her, of course, before she performed the operation," exclaimed Endicott, who had followed the story with great interest.

"An extremely interesting break—to be continued in our next," observed the medical student.

"Yes I caught her before she left the pier, and whirled her around, keeping a tight hold on her, and said:

"Young woman, what on earth are you up to? Don't you know that you are committing a sin against your Creator by attempting to take the life which he gave you?"

"Oh, you've mistaken your vocation—you ought to be a parson, if you can rattle it off as easily as that!" exclaimed the irrepressible Winslow.

"Hold your yawp! as the Downeasters say!" cried the lawyer.

"Gentlemen, by this movement I was brought face to face with the girl, and I give you my word, although I am an artist and have made a study of such things, I never knew how beautiful a woman could be until that moment.

"She was a girl of eighteen or nineteen, with the face of a child—a clear red and white complexion, eyes of the deepest, darkest blue, hair pure golden in color and clinging in little clustering curls over the most perfect forehead I ever saw; in fine, take the face for all in all, a vision of most heavenly beauty!"

"I take it back, more poet than parson," Winslow remarked.

"She burst into a flood of tears and nestled her head down upon my bosom like a tired child.

"When she recovered from her emotion she told me her sad story.

"She had been reared in England, having lost her parents at an early age, and there was some mystery about them that she never understood.

"Death struck down her relatives there and she was advised to seek an uncle who resided here in Boston.

"She crossed the ocean and landed in this country with scarcely a penny in her pocket.

"All attempts to find her uncle were in vain; she tried to procure work, but being a stranger in a strange land, every door seemed closed against her; her money became exhausted, and rather than appeal for charity she determined to destroy herself, but my opportune arrival prevented the accomplishment of that purpose.

"I provided her with money and took her to a quiet hotel, explaining to the landlord that she was a lady friend who, upon visiting the city had not been able to find the people whom she came to see.

"The next day I found a boarding-house for her and told her not to worry because I would pay all bills until she was able to provide for herself.

"But I hadn't any idea of letting her work for I had fallen in love with her and was determined to marry her if she would have me.

"In three months I won her consent and we were secretly married. I feared my uncle's anger and so I didn't dare to let him know of the affair until I felt strong enough to stand alone.

"I didn't even let my wife know anything of my family affairs; she knows I'm an artist who manages to make a decent living and that is all.

"I confessed to uncle to day, and though he was annoyed yet he agreed to see my wife and I am to bring him to her to-morrow. I can see very plainly that he believes I have fallen into the hands of some wily adventuress and made a fool of myself, but when he once looks into the face of my angel wife and sees my beautiful boy, he will change his mind."

"Well, you've got it bad, old fellow, and for a man who has been married fifteen months, too, it is wonderful," Winslow observed.

"Joke away all you like, but I've been a happy man ever since I wedded my little woman. Uncle is suspicious though, I'll own, and he has requested me not to say anything about our family or social position, until he gets a chance to see her. I have an idea that he is going to play the poor old uncle dodge on her, but I'll stake my life on her standing the test.

"I never said a word about my expectations because I wanted to surprise her some day.

"But now, boys, I must be off. I've got to call upon my dear ones and then take the late

train to Providence, as I have arranged to meet my patron there at eight in the morning, the man who discovered me as Columbus discovered America.

"One last glass at parting, gentlemen, and please remember, although I am a married man and a man of family, yet I am just as much a member of our brotherhood as I ever was, and if any trouble should come to either one of you, both my money and life are at your service!"

"It is a grand legend, boys, 'one for all and all for one!'"

And then the three clasped hands and drank their wine.

Five minutes later Crowningshield departed.

The other two remained silent for a few moments after the door closed behind their friend.

The lawyer was the first to speak.

"What do you think, Winslow?"

"That the old captain is right; our friend is in the toils I fear. He is just as innocent as a child.

The bridge scene was played to entrap him and succeeded to perfection."

"Suppose trouble comes?"

"We'll pull him through either by fair means or foul. We'll stick to him tighter than wax."

"True, one for all and all for one! Fill up your glass again and we'll drink confusion to all adventuresses!"

CHAPTER III.

THE TAWNY SIREN.

CROWNINGSHIELD had domiciled his wife in a couple of cosy furnished rooms up-town on Dover street, a block or so this side of South Boston bridge.

All of his friends and acquaintances being located on the other side of town in the Beacon street district, he judged that there would not be much danger of any one recognizing him so far up-town.

His calculation was correct. Since he had taken his wife there he had never encountered a soul in the neighborhood whom he knew.

The rooms too were situated in such a way as to be easily accessible from the street.

They were up one flight, and could be reached by both a front and rear staircase.

All one had to do was to pass in by the gate at the side of the house, go through the narrow passage to the yard and then ascend by the back stairs.

One was not put to the trouble of going to the door and unlocking it with a latch-key.

Owing to the peculiar way in which the young artist was situated he was not able to be home but a few hours during the twenty-four.

Dependent as he was upon his uncle's bounty he took all possible precautions to prevent the discovery of his secret.

He left his wife at an early hour in the morning and did not return until near midnight.

In this way his absence was never noticed or commented upon.

He had a room at his uncle's house on Beacon street, bachelor apartments of his own in the same building in which his studio was situated on Tremont street, besides the old garret, the club-room of the three friends.

When he was not at one place he was supposed to be at one of the others, and so until the success of his picture enabled him to make a bold stand, his secret was not even suspected.

After leaving his friends Crowningshield proceeded to Washington street and took a car which soon landed him in front of the house which held his treasures.

As it was night, he went by way of the front door, and proceeded up-stairs.

He had told his wife that he should return earlier that evening than usual, on account of the trip to Providence, and she was awaiting him.

The child had been put to bed, and was reposing in peaceful slumber in the cradle.

The young husband had not overestimated the beauty of the girl whose acquaintance he had made so strangely, and whom he had so strangely won.

She was wonderfully beautiful, and yet there was something lacking in the face.

A close observer would have hit off the truth by saying that there wasn't any "soul" in the features.

It was more like the face of a beautiful doll than the face of a woman, and yet there was temper and spirit enough about it, too; the flashing eyes, resolute lines about the mouth, and thin nostrils proved that.

She was a little under the medium height, beautifully proportioned, a figure worthy the attention of the old-time sculptor, who, from the cold marble created the Venus, so perfect in every respect, that it seemed more like a sleeping mortal than anything else.

But she was an odd creature, and there was something about her that at times puzzled even the husband who fairly idolized her.

She was only twenty, right in the blush and bloom of youth, yet she did not act at all like a young girl.

She was so very quiet and reserved.

At her age the average young woman is fond of pleasure, delights to mingle with the world, and enjoys the shows of society.

But the artist's bride, on the contrary, never seemed to care to go abroad, but much preferred to remain secluded at home.

And then, at times, she was troubled with odd, silent spells, and in spite of her beauty and the suggestion of passion that her face and form promised, she was as cold as a vestal sworn to eternal service at the shrine of some heathen goddess.

The artist himself was not of a passionate nature, having the true, cold, Northern temperament; but sometimes the thought would occur to him that he would be far happier if his wife had a more loving nature.

Even to her child, as sweet a little golden-haired fellow as ever the eyes of a mother looked upon, she was cold and distant.

She did not seem to take the extreme delight in his childish gambols which mothers are wont to take, and sometimes the dread suspicion would come into the mind of the young husband that there was something the matter with his wife's brain, and yet in everything but this coldness toward her husband and her child, she seemed to be all right.

Her name was an odd one, too; a name seldom borne by a girl nowadays.

It was Roxanna—Roxanna Merivale.

She was sitting at the table when Crowningshield entered, resting her cheek upon her hand, with a vacant look in her eyes as though her thoughts were far away.

She rose to greet her husband, saluting him with the cold, formal kiss so utterly without any demonstration of affection natural to her.

"I can spare you but a few minutes to-night," he said, as he sat down in the rocking-chair and drew the beautiful creature upon his lap.

"Having tarried down-town longer than I ought to have done, I must haste away so as to catch my train."

"Will you have some lunch before you go?" she asked, submitting patiently to his caresses, but not making the slightest pretense of returning them.

"No, I haven't time. I thought I would just run in and take a look at you and my boy, that's all. How is my darling?"

"Well—perfectly well: he is always well," she answered, in the most indifferent manner possible. A hired nurse would have betrayed far more interest in the child.

Her manner pained the father; somehow he did not feel at all right about leaving her to-night, but he tried manfully to rid himself of the idea.

"Well, puss, you can exist without me for one night, I suppose?"

"I will have to try, whether I like it or not," she replied, with a faint smile.

"Of course, one of these days, when the time comes, one of us will have to exist without the other."

"Oh, don't talk in that way!" the husband exclaimed. "You make a cold chill run all over me."

"I shall be back to-morrow all right; there's not the least danger of an accident in a little run down to Providence."

"To-morrow, you know, my uncle is coming to see you."

"He's a quaint old fellow—followed the sea in his early life, and is full of all sorts of ideas, but his heart is in the right place."

"You think a great deal of your uncle, I suppose, or you would not burden yourself with him," and as the girl spoke there was an accent in her voice that grated on the ears of Crowningshield.

"You mustn't speak in that way, dear. He's a jolly old soul, and does far more for me than I for him."

The manner in which she spoke gave him the impression that she believed his uncle to be a poor man, and dependent upon him for support.

Now, he had never said anything calculated to give her this idea.

All he had done in the matter was to suppress the fact that the old captain was one of the richest men in the city.

He did not like the tone in which she spoke, and while he was meditating how he could disabuse her mind of the idea that his uncle was dependent on his bounty without revealing to her the truth in regard to his riches, she said, abruptly:

"You believe in we humans having faith in one another, don't you?"

"Yes, most decidedly! What would this world be without trust and faith?"

"And if you trusted any one it would be a hard matter to shake your faith in them?"

"Yes, indeed."

And this was the truth, for a more loyal man never trod the earth than the young artist.

"And have you faith in me?"

"As much faith as I have in heaven," Crowningshield answered.

"And you would not believe any one who should come to you and tell wild tales about my life before I knew you?"

The girl was playing a part now, for she was exerting all the powers of the wonderful gifts that nature had given her to fascinate her husband.

Her eyes were beaming softly upon him, a winning smile opened her rich, ripe, scarlet lips, disclosing the pearly teeth beneath, and with her soft white hand she was gently stroking his face.

Crowningshield, although the husband, the master, of this marvelous beauty, was as much intoxicated by her fascinations as the drunkard is who fills himself to the lips with liquor.

"About your life—why, you were a child, dear, and are not much more now."

"People might say terrible things about a child," she murmured, laying her velvet-like cheek against his own.

Tightly he clasped her to his heart.

"I would not allow any one to say a word against my little wife, and the man daring enough to attempt to do such a thing in defiance of my command would be risking his life, for I am certain I should take him by the throat and throttle the lie ere he could give utterance to it!"

"My darling!" and for about the first time in her life she imprinted a loving kiss upon his lips.

Then, almost before she was conscious of what she was doing, she released herself from his embrace and sprang nimbly to her feet.

"At what time do you start, dear?" she asked, glancing at the clock upon the mantle-piece.

"Eleven," he replied and then looking at the clock he saw that it was after ten. "I must be off."

He rose to his feet, approached the cradle and kissed the sleeping babe, which, seeming to know that its father was near, smiled in his slumber.

"Ah, Roxy, if I should lose you and this blessed babe I believe I should go crazy."

Then, with another embrace of the girl and a last lingering look at the child, he departed.

"With his love to back me I can defy fate," she muttered as she sunk into a chair.

CHAPTER IV.

OLD LEAD PENCIL.

THE girl resumed her abstracted air and for fully ten minutes she neither spoke or stirred.

Then, abruptly, she lifted her head and looked around her, fixing at last her gaze upon the cradle containing the child.

"He would go crazy if wife and child were taken from him!" she murmured, repeating the last words of her husband.

"Well, he will be rewarded for his faith, for now there isn't any danger that he will lose either of us; but this afternoon though the scales trembled and the future was very uncertain."

Hardly had the words been uttered when the door suddenly opened and an old man, dressed in a seedy suit, so badly worn that it was almost in rags, with a long iron-gray beard and straggling hair of the same hue escaping from under the rim of a shockingly bad hat abruptly entered the apartment.

"Excuse my comin' in without knockin'," he said, in a husky voice, which had evidently been ruined by too much bad whisky.

"But you see, ma'am, I was afeard that if I knocked you might git frightened, not knowin' who it was, an' mebbe not expectin' wisitors at sich an hour as this 'ere, an' go fur to lock the bloomin' door an' then I wouldn't be able to get in at all."

"What do you wish, sir?" asked the girl, in the most matter-of-fact way in the world, just as if it was an every-day occurrence to have a big, burly tramp walk into her room after ten in the evening.

But the girl was too cool for the calmness to be natural, and there was a peculiar snaky glitter in her dark eyes which belied her manner.

"You're jest old business, ain't you, every time?" exclaimed the old fellow, with a grin.

"Well, ma'am, I'm on the lead-pencil lay, an' that's the kind o' a frying-pan I am," and as he spoke he drew a half-a-dozen cheap lead-pencils from his pocket. "The boys all call me Old Lead Pencil."

"I do not wish any, sir," the lady responded, indifferently.

"Oh, you don't? Ain't hankerin' after any lead-pencils this evening or some other evening; good evening!" And the old wretch grinned at his joke.

"No, sir, I am supplied."

"You wouldn't give me a hundred dollars apiece for three or four of the pencils, mebbe?"

"You are crazy, sir!" the girl answered, contemptuously.

"I do not wish your pencils, and you will oblige me by leaving my apartment."

"You are an old man, and I suppose you have been drinking more than is good for you, therefore I would rather not call the police as I surely shall do if you do not depart."

"Oh, Roxy, you darlin' dumplin'! you wouldn't play sich a game as that on an old acquaintance, would you?" he exclaimed, with a familiar leer.

She rose from her seat and, with a resolute face, approached the casement.

"If you do not immediately depart I will throw up the window and call for help!" she exclaimed.

"Hold on!" cried the old man in alarm, "don't make a Judy of yourself!"

"You ain't got no call to howl for the police. I've come to talk over business with you, quietly and perlately, an' if we can't make a trade, why, I'll pull up stakes and git out, but don't go to yelling for the police afore you are hurt."

"Well, sir, I will listen to what you have to say, but be brief, and in the beginning I warn you that you are but wasting time."

She still kept her position by the window, ready to call for aid if the necessity arose.

"Aha! you're all the mother from top to toe!" he exclaimed, "but for all yer cunnin' and grit I've got yer dead to rights this time, as you'll soon see."

"Go on, you weary me!"

"Wal, if you ain't got a cheek!" the old man exclaimed in amazement.

"Say, you saw me to-day, didn't you?"

"Why should I trouble myself about such a thing as you are?" she asked in scornful contempt.

"Say, go slow! you'll be sorry 'fore long for cheeking me in this 'ere way."

"I know you saw me to-day, for you hurried into the house, thinking that I hadn't got sight of you."

"I made out as if I hadn't, for as I had located you, I was mightily afeard lest you should take the alarm and give me the slip, for I've been arter you for nearly two years now, an' I didn't want you to come any eel business on yer uncle."

"You were well fixed, I could see that by the way you were rigged; you wasn't starvin', or slavin', or nothing, an' I reckoned you'd be good for a small stake anyway, so I jest humped myself to find out all about you, an' from w'ot I heered when you an' your husband were chinning together awhile ago—I was in the entry with my ear to the keyhole, and cotched every word—I reckon I know a heap sight more about your man than you do."

A look of astonishment appeared in the girl's eyes.

"I do not think that is possible," she said.

"Wal, it is," the old man asserted. "He's been playin' roots on you, for all he's so sweet on you."

"I knew what your game was when you asked him if he would take any stock in bad stories 'bout you. You had seen me in the neighborhood, and you were a-fixin' to ward off the blow afore it come."

"My husband would not believe any evil of me," she remarked, quietly.

"I don't doubt it, particularly when it wouldn't be an easy job, an' would be apt to cost a small fortune to bring such proof as the law would demand."

"You know darned well that a cove with my ugly record couldn't go into that sort of thing, an' so you reckoned, when you played yer points so mighty fine with him, that you bad spiked my guns afore I brought 'em to bear on you."

"My husband will not listen to any tales," she remarked, calmly.

"No, but there's other people that will, an' mighty glad of the chance they'll be, too."

"Your husband, with all his softness, has fooled you 'bout some things."

"You married him, goin' on the tack of any port in a storm. He comes of an old family, one of the big-bugs, a reg'lar gentleman, an' no mistake; an' I s'pose you were glad to strike peace an' rest almost anywhere."

"But the game your husband played on you was this: The old captain who is coming to see you to-morrow, instead of being poor, is one of the richest men in Boston, and your husband is to be his heir."

The breath of the woman came quick and hard, for this news astounded her.

"If he is satisfied with you, all will be well; you'll go to live on Beacon street, an' be one of the swellest of the swells; but—"

And here the face of the old man took on the expression of a fiend, and malignant triumph rung in his hoarse voice.

"S'pose some kind friend takes the pains to go to the old captain and tell him certain things 'bout the girl called Roxy Merivale, whom his beloved nephew has married?"

"Do you s'pose that the old man won't jump at the chance to find out whether the tale is true or not?"

"Do you s'pose, if the suspicion once comes into his noddle that there is a grain of truth in the yarns, that he won't spend money like water to find out all 'bout it?"

The girl was now as pale as death; gasping for breath she leaned against the window-sill and but for the support afforded by it, she would not have been able to stand.

"That's Old Lead Pencil's game and it's bound to win every time; don't you forget it, either!" the tramp exclaimed in conclusion.

There was a long pause.

The girl, despite her delicate, fragile appearance, was in reality tough and strong, possessed too of a will of iron, and a heart as indomitable as that which ever beat in the breast of a warrior chief born to lead his fellows on to victory.

But this blow was a stunning one, and rapidly as her mind generally worked it took time for her to recover from it, although she had expected an attack and was prepared to resist it, yet she had not calculated upon it descending upon her with such terrible force.

Finally she recovered sufficiently to say:

"What is it you wish?"

"Money of course!" he answered, roughly.

"Don't think a stout, healthy old chap like me kin live on wind, do ye?"

"You kin get plenty, so I want you to shell out a few of yer ducats to help along a poor old chap w'ot has had a tough fight with the world."

"I ain't got long to live, mebbe; I drink too much for the good of my health, but it's got so that it is like mother's milk to me and I can't git along without it."

"I've jist been on the hunt for years for to find some kind, charitable soul w'ot would be willing to soothe my declining years, and fix me so I would slide down easy to my last kick."

"I ain't a-going to rob you of the money either, that ain't the kind of a chap I am."

"I'm no feller w'ot goes 'round fixing myself so that the law kin get a hold on me. I'm an honest man w'ot makes a decent livin' a-sellin' lead-pencils, but when I trade with a gal like yourself I want the profit which you kin afford to pay."

"These here pencils stand me in a cent apiece an' I'll let you have 'em at a hundred dollars a lick."

"A hundred dollars!" exclaimed the girl, contemptuously, for by this time she had in a great measure recovered her calmness.

"Heaven help me! I haven't a hundred cents."

"I'll take w'ot you've got," he replied with a grin. "A gentleman of my kidney never stands upon trifles."

"I ain't a-goin' to be hard on yer. I didn't calculate that you were well heeled now. But fer all that I'll take what little loose change you have handy."

And then he grinned again as if he thought he had "got off" a splendid joke.

"Tain't the present, my gal, that I'm speculatin' upon but the future. Oh, I'm a long-headed old cuss, I tell yer!"

"I'm a-lookin' forward to the time when you won't be squeezed up in such a dog's hole as this 'ere," and he glanced around at the modest, snug apartment in the most contemptuous way.

"I'm a-lookin' forward to the time when yer will be dressed in silk an' satins, with diamonds as big as chestnuts a-sparkling all over yer."

"When yer kin go to the old coon of a cap'n, an' strike him for a thousand chocks, 'cos yer want a new dress, or some thingumbob for to rig yerself up in."

"Oh, you'll have him dead to rights in less'n a month arter yer git a chance ter git yer fine work in. Then you kin pay me dollars easier than you kin cents now."

"You see, Roxy, dear, I'm a-gittin' old, an' this 'ere trampin' 'round a-sellin' lead-pencils ain't w'ot it's cracked up to be."

"A reg'lar allowance would suit me to a dot. I won't be hard on yer, yer know; I won't go for to rob you; I'm no sich kind of a man."

"'Bout fifty dollars a week, two hundred a month yer know, twelve hundred a year, would be the proper caper."

The girl drew a long breath and her eyes dilated, a look coming into them that resembled the glare which shoots from the eyes of the hunted wild beast, when he finds that he can go no further and turns to give battle to the hunter who has run him down.

The old tramp though was so busy enjoying the bright vision which his words had conjured up in his mind that he never noticed the dangerous expression in the eyes of the girl.

"Yes, yes, that's the figger!" he continued.

"Fifty dollars a week will keep me in rum an' things an' then I kin skip out of these rags an' be a gentleman ag'in."

"I don't want it paid to me in a lump, yer know," he exclaimed.

"If I collared it all in a hunk, I would be apt for to go on a spree an' blow all the ducats to one't."

"I'll fix it with some feller, a third party, yer know, that yer kin pay the money ter, a safe cuss w'ot won't squeal, an' then he kin pay me weekly, so there won't be any danger of yer gittin' into any trouble. Oh, I'll fix the thing right up to the handle, yer kin depend upon that."

"Why not say a certain sum and have done with it?" she asked.

"Now, yer see that's where my squar'ness as a man comes in!" the old fellow exclaimed with an air of great dignity.

"I scorn for to take any advantage of yer."

"I'm a scholar, I am, an' my principal study ever since I was a knee-high kid has been myself. I knows my weaknesses."

"If yer were for to stake me with ten thousand ducats on condition that I should clear cut an' never bother yer ag'in, the chances are a hundred to one that yer'd see me back inside of a year, for that's the kind of a beat I am."

"No, no, no lump sum, 'cos I ain't sure for to

hold it. No, no, I'm a-lettin' go my anchors this time with the hope that they'll take a good grip so I'll be able to ride in safety and security for all the rest of my life."

"If I do not please this rich relative of my husband your finely-planned scheme will come to naught," the girl remarked, a thoughtful expression upon her face.

"Bah!" exclaimed the old man in supreme contempt, "there ain't any more doubt 'bout yer suitin' the capt'n than there is that the sun which comes up in the mornin' will go down at night!"

"Do yer think I don't know yer? do you think I ain't up to the game you kin play? Bless yer! when it comes to working a trick of this kind, I'd back yer with all the wealth I could raise against any woman w'ot walks on top of this 'ere footstool."

The girl did not speak for a few moments; her eyes were bent upon the floor and she was evidently deep in thought.

At last she raised her head, a more quiet look in her eyes, and yet there was a sparkle there, which a close observer would have understood to mean mischief.

"Well, nothing can be settled to-night at any rate; to-morrow after I see the gentleman I may be able to say something," she said.

"I'll come to-morrow then arter I see him safe out of the way. Don't you be afeard! I won't give the thing away by any blunder. I allers play my game for all the keerds are worth."

"An' I say, Roxy, don't furgit to put in yer big licks—it's a fortin' this time. If you hook this fish you'll never need to cast a line ag'in. It's a couple o' million, gal, that ye'r' a-playin' fer, an' out of sich a stake as that w'ot's the paltry dollars that you'll have to fork over to me?"

"Nothin' but a bone which from yer overloaded table yer fling to yer dog."

"To-morrow will decide," she said, with a weary air.

"Wal, I'll git. I s'pose ye'r' tired an' mebbe I upset yer a little," and the old man grinned maliciously.

"But these yere things will happen. Say, can't you give me a few dollars?" and he extended his dirty, claw-like hand.

"Not a penny!" flamed out the girl in sudden wrath. "If I win the fortune I may be compelled to submit to your demands, but until I do I will not, so begone!"

"Don't be spiteful, Roxy, now," rejoined the old man in a wheedling way. "Mebbe I did come it a leetle rough on you, but I had to do it. We can't afford to quarrel. Yer know I can't blow on yer, so don't be hard on me. Give me the price of some rum an' a night's lodgin' any way, 'cos I'm clean broke."

"Here," with an expression of contemptuous disdain such as might have become an empress, the girl tendered a silver dollar to the old man. He clutched it eagerly.

"Aha, I knowed you wouldn't go back on the feller you know!" he exclaimed.

"Wal, so-long until to-morrow. Play yer game as you know how to play it and you'll hook the old fish jist as easily as you did the young one," and with this remark the tramp departed.

The girl locked and bolted the door after him, then paced excitedly up and down the room for a few moments.

"I did hesitate but now my indecision is ended!" she exclaimed. "I was foolish too, because my heart is not in the life, and now since this miserable wretch appears, if I went on I should be electing to dwell by the side of a volcano which might at any time burst forth and overwhelm me."

Besides, what a life to lead—the slave of this old drunkard, compelled to rob the men who believe in me to satisfy his demands.

"No, no, thanks to fortune, it is but a single step and I am free!"

Twenty minutes later the light was out in the apartment and Old Lead Pencil, having slaked his raging thirst with three big drinks at the saloon nearly opposite, muttered as he came out into the street and glanced up at the darkened windows:

"Aha, she's gone to roost. Ain't she a daisy though? W'ot a lucky thing it was that I happened to run across her. I'm fixed for the rest of my life an' no mistake."

"She'll do the trick all right and then for lush an' fun, with no thoughts of the future. No poor-house fer yer uncle, if yer please."

And then he went up the avenue toward Washington street to procure lodging for the night.

Ere many hours, though, he was fated to discover that he did not know the girl who had called herself Roxy Merivale, as well as he had imagined.

Time sped on, the night waned and morning came. Old Lead Pencil took up his quarters at the little saloon opposite, from the screened window of which he could watch the house wherein his prey dwelt.

He was not favored with the sight of the girl though, for she neither made her appearance at

either of the windows, nor came out of the mansion upon any errand.

"She's layin' low an' gittin' ready for the skirmish," the old tramp chuckled.

At three in the afternoon, the tall, handsome, gentlemanly artist and the short, sturdy, bluff old Captain Crowningshield made their appearance.

"Inside of an hour the game will be in my hands!" Old Lead Pencil cried.

But he is a wise man in this world who can read the future, as the tramp was speedily to discover.

When the nephew and uncle entered the house they were confronted by the mistress of it, an honest English dame, widow Doncaster, in a state of great agitation.

"Oh, Mr. Crowningshield, whatever has become of your wife?" she cried, wringing her hands as though she anticipated that there had been some great calamity.

"Here's her poor little baby a-cryin' its eyes out; I made bold to go into the rooms early this morning, hearing the child cry, and thinking maybe, that it was sick, and so I went in to see if I could help your wife. The doors were unlocked, the baby sat up in the cradle crying its little eyes out, and there wasn't any sign of your lady, except this letter addressed to you, which I found on the table."

The artist tore open the letter, his brains whirling with excitement.

CHAPTER V. THE LETTER.

THE breath of the young man came thick and hard, and for a moment the words inscribed on the written page danced before his eyes, so he was unable to make them out.

He strove with a mighty effort to calm himself and meet the blow, whatever its nature, like a man.

Of course he anticipated that he was about to receive a terrible shock, for otherwise a mother would never have absented herself from her child and left such a precious treasure to the care of strangers.

The note was an extremely brief one and traced upon a single page of note paper.

It read as follows, beginning abruptly thus:

"I leave you our child, secure in the belief that he will never want for anything while you live."

"Think as kindly of me as you can, and rest assured if there is any justice in this world you will surely receive your reward for the protection and care you bestowed upon one who sadly needed it."

And that was all there was to the letter.

The artist read the letter over three times before he really comprehended its meaning, simple as it was.

Of the good old Puritan race came Crowningshield, from the sturdy pioneers who crossed a stormy sea in their frail barks, and wrested a new world from the hands of the red savages.

And now in this hour of trial he met the terrible blow like a man.

At first he was unable to believe that he had read the note aright; it did not seem possible to him that the woman whom he had loved and cherished and trusted, could have fled from him like a thief in the night, leaving her child behind, and with no more explanation than the brief note afforded.

And that, indeed, was no explanation at all; it merely implied the fact, but gave no reason for it.

The old captain watched the face of his nephew anxiously when he opened the letter, and his long acquaintanceship with the other's way, enabled him to perceive that the young man had received a terrible shock, although it was not in the least perceptible to the widow, who was staring at young Crowningshield with all the eyes in her head as he perused the letter.

The first impulse of the artist was to keep the letter to himself, and shield the erring one by some course; but as he turned toward his uncle he saw that the keen, shrewd eyes of the old gentleman were upon him, and he felt it would be impossible to deceive him; besides, his soul revolted at the idea of deceit, even to shield the fault of the woman he had loved so well, and so acting on this second impulse, he handed the letter to the old gentleman.

The captain clapped his glasses on his nose and perused the letter.

The elder Crowningshield was a man who had lived too long in the world to allow his face to betray what was passing within his mind, so not a muscle moved while he read the brief epistle.

He did not know what to make of it.

When his nephew had revealed to him his secret marriage, and related in what a romantic way he had made the acquaintance of the lady, he had pursed up his lips and remarked, "It was very odd," and in his secret heart there was the fear that the "boy," whom he loved as well as though he was his own son, had made a mistake, but he never hinted a word of this.

He only said he would like to see her, and expressed the hope she would prove to be a good wife.

The young man had responded, enthusiastically of course, as was only natural under the circumstances.

Not a word had the captain said to indicate the suspicion that was latent in his mind.

And now that this unexpected blow had fallen he immediately took measures to soften the calamity as much as possible by keeping the matter strictly private.

Not for a goodly sum would he be willing to have it published to the world that the friendless girl whom his nephew had been unwise enough to marry, attracted by her beautiful face, had been so unworthy of the trust placed in her, and so deaf to the claims of nature, as to desert her husband and babe.

"It's very strange," he remarked, as he folded up the letter in the most matter-of-fact way possible. "She must have been detained—some accident may have happened on the road, for by leaving the child without saying anything about it, it is plain she expected to return within an hour or so. If she had expected to be detained for any length of time, she surely would have taken the child with her, or made some arrangements regarding it."

"I've often minded the baby for her, sir, when she has been going out for a while," said widow Doncaster, "and I'm sure I would only have been too glad to have accommodated her this time, if she had only said something about it."

"As it is, after I had heard the baby cry for awhile, I came in with the idea of helping Mrs. Crowningshield, for I didn't know she was out, and I declare, gentlemen, you might have knocked me down with a feather when I found that the baby was all alone."

"Some accident has occurred, of course; she may have been taken ill in the street," the old gentleman remarked, "or some of these careless drivers may have run over her. In either case, it is possible that she has been carried to the hospital, and has not been able to send word home."

"Sometimes it is almost impossible to procure a messenger," continued the captain. "I think, Howard, that the best thing you can do is to carry the baby to my house, and my folks will look out for him until we find out what has become of Mrs. Crowningshield."

"I've not the least doubt that she is all right somewhere, but unable to get a messenger."

"Oh, sir, I declare you have taken a weight from my mind," the widow declared.

"I didn't know what on earth to think, and all sorts of dreadful things came into my mind."

Mrs. Doncaster hesitated to openly declare the nature of the suspicions which had haunted her.

She was a woman who had seen a great deal of the world, and lone women who are obliged to fight for an existence and keep the wolf from the door by means of a boarding or lodging-house, do not as a general rule look upon mankind with a favorable eye.

The beautiful young woman who called herself Mrs. Howard Crowningshield, was a mystery to the lodging-house keeper.

She had none of the gossiping habits of her sex, and in spite of Mrs. Doncaster's clever endeavors to extract information from her, the widow really knew no more about her after she had been in the house a year, than she did when the lady had occupied the rooms a week.

One very suspicious thing in the widow's opinion was, that her guest did not seem to have any acquaintances.

From the day she entered the doors of the house, up to the night of her disappearance, not a single soul had ever called upon her.

And when one day the widow tried to get at a solution of the mystery, artfully approaching the matter by saying:

"I should think you would be dreadfully lonesome, dear, with your husband away all day, and your friends don't seem to call half as often as they might."

The explanation given by the girl was so simple, that it completely silenced the boarding-house keeper:

"I haven't any friends or even acquaintances in the city," she replied. "I am from England, and do not know any one here."

This was probable enough, but then, if it was true, why didn't her relatives or friends write to her?

Not a single letter had she received since she had dwelt in the house.

The widow scouted her on this point, and again the explanation was perfectly reasonable.

She was an orphan without a relative in the world, as far as she knew, and as for friends, although she had plenty in England, there were none that she cared to correspond with.

But for all this, probable and reasonable as were these replies, the widow was not satisfied. She was sure something was wrong, although she couldn't guess what.

And when this unexpected disappearance took place—it confirmed her suspicions.

The easy manner though in which the two gentlemen received the news—for both the nephew and uncle were too well-bred to allow a stranger to perceive how severe was the blow which they had so unexpectedly received—staggered her.

"Well, you needn't take the dear child away on my account, if you expect Mrs. Crowningshield to return soon, for I can take care of the

little darling," she said. "I'm sure he isn't the least bit of trouble, for he's just as good as good can be."

"He cried bitterly after his mother this morning when he woke up, but of course that was to be expected, for he didn't understand being left all alone, and then he wanted his breakfast, too, but after I fed him he played around quite cheerful, although he would cry for mamma, every once in a while."

"But then he's used to me, you see, for I've often looked after him when Mrs. Crowningshield went out."

This was the truth, and as the widow was a goodhearted, motherly kind of a woman, the baby had borne the absence of its mother very patiently.

"I am much obliged for your kind offer, madam, but I think it will be better to relieve you from the responsibility, because if my wife has met with any serious accident it might be some time before she would be able to return," the young husband remarked.

"That would be by far the wisest course," observed the captain.

"I will leave the keys of the rooms with you," said the young man to the widow, "so that if my wife should happen to return she can gain access to the apartments, and give her this card, please."

Drawing a card from his pocket, Crowningshield wrote a brief message upon it:

"I have taken the baby to the house of my uncle, 1040 Beacon street, and I leave this card here for you so you will know where to come."

Such was the message, and to it he merely signed the initials of his name.

"There, if you will give that to her, please."

Mrs. Doncaster said she would be sure to remember to deliver it.

Then the baby, who was delighted to recognize its "papa," of whom it was very fond, was dressed for the street, its clothes made up into a bundle, and the two men, with the child, departed.

The old captain had examined the baby without allowing his rugged old face to manifest any particular interest, but the little fellow had taken a liking to the old gentleman, going to him in perfect willingness, delighted at the chance to pull the captain's beard.

"Strange, too, come to think of it!" exclaimed the widow, as she gazed at the card after the others had departed. "None of Mr. Crowningshield's folk ever came here either. I guess they are great folks, too; all the people who live on Beacon street must be rich, and the old gentleman looks like a man of property."

CHAPTER VI.

THE TRAMP'S RAGE.

Old Lead Pencil, from his ambush behind the screen in the saloon window, had been anxiously watching the development of events.

When he saw the nephew and uncle enter the house, he chuckled and rubbed his hands gleefully together.

"Aha, there they go, an' now my tawny little witch will have a chance to get in her work!" he mused to himself.

The saloon-keeper was busy with his customers at the bar, and as the old man sat with his back to the group, pretending to be interested in the morning paper, which he held in his hands; no one took the slightest notice of him, and he was able to talk freely to himself.

"Ain't she a daisy? Oh, yer can bet all your wealth on that! She was inclined to be ugly last night, but jist as soon as I showed her how things were, she come right down from her high horse."

"She'll make the runnin' now and collar this couple of millions jist as easy as rollin' off a log, an' then your uncle will come in for his divvy."

"Aha!" and again the old man rubbed his hands together, "fifty chocks a week! How is that for high?"

"Won't I have all the big feed an' rum I want? Wal, now, yer kin jest bet yer bottom dollar on it."

And so the old man continued, gloating over the pleasant prospect before him, for some fifteen minutes, and then, to his astonishment, he saw the two men come out of the house, the young father carrying his child, and the widow accompanied them to the door, holding it wide open, so that the old man could plainly distinguish that there wasn't any one else in the entry, until the visitors had gained the sidewalk.

For a few moments Old Lead Pencil stared in astonishment.

"Dang my buttons!" he exclaimed, "w'ot on earth does this 'ere mean?"

"Here come these two coves a-waltzin' out with the kid, and the mother ain't to the fore. Has there been a kick-up?"

And the face of the old man fairly grew pale at the bare idea.

"Oh, it ain't possible! She would never be such a fool as to throw away a fortin' like it was a lump of dirt."

"An' the coves ain't bin in the house ten minnits, either!"

"Oh, cuss the thing! it's a-makin' the cold sweat come out all over me!"

The old man was visibly affected, and drew

from his pocket an extremely dirty red handkerchief with which to mop his face.

"They couldn't have settled the business in ten minutes, unless they got inter a row an' bu'sted the hull thing to smithereens."

"But then she'd never let 'em carry away the kid! No, no, she's no sich fool as that. As long as she kept the kid she'd have a pull on its daddy, an' he would be obligated to toe the mark, when she wanted ducats."

"Oh, w'ot the blazes does it mean, anyhow?" he cried, in conclusion, really suffering agony.

By the time these words were spoken, the two men with the child had entered a street-car and disappeared.

And as in his dazed way the old tramp continued to gaze at the house, he was astonished to see the landlady, Mrs. Doncaster, appear at the windows.

First she appears at one and then at the other, drawing the curtains down so that the sunlight should not ruin her carpet.

Old Lead Pencil gazed open-mouthed at this maneuver.

"Now, in the name of thunder, what does that mean?" he muttered.

"A-pullin' down the curtains looks to me a mighty sight like shuttin' up the place. An' where is my gal all this time?"

"The old woman sees the gents to the door, an' the old woman pulls down the curtain, an' nary sign is there of my beauty."

"Oh, I can't stand this!" he murmured, rising to his feet. "I must go over an' find out w'ot's up. I'm beginning to git mighty anxious now, you better believe."

"It can't be possible that my daisy has cut an' run for it!"

Again the cold drops of perspiration stood on his forehead, and the thought annoyed him so that he was obliged to lay hold of the chain for support.

"Oh, my heavens, no!" he muttered. "She surely would never be foolish enough to try sich a trick as that, when she had this one magnificent game right in her hands."

"It would be jist like a woman, though. The durned critters don't seem to have no sense sometimes. They act onc't in a while jist like the cow which gives a nice pail of milk an' then kicks the hull business over."

"Inside of five minits I'll know the rights of the things though," he continued. "I kin easily hatch up some lie to pull the wool over the old dame's eyes. Oh, if she has got out, where will I fetch my fifty dollars a week from?"

And in the bitterness of his heart he groaned so loud in going out of the door as to attract the attention of every one in the saloon, and the presiding genius of the place remarked:

"I reckon the old cuss feels pretty bad to howl that way."

Straight across the street went Old Lead Pencil, and, boldly ascending the front steps, rung the door-bell.

At all risks he was determined to know the worst. While crossing the street he had cooked up a yarn which he was confident would deceive the landlady.

As he had expected, Mrs. Doncaster in person came in answer to the bell.

Old Lead Pencil made a bow in the most humble manner, when the widow, glaring askance at the man, for she had a mortal horror of all tramps, inquired what he wanted.

"I beg your pardon, miss," he began. "It was his trick to address all middle-aged ladies as 'Miss,' thinking thereby to gain their favor by the compliment to their youthful appearance. 'Will you be so kind as to say to the young lady w'ot lives on the second floor—'"

"Mrs. Crowningshield?" exclaimed the widow, eagerly, thinking that it was possible this tramp-like person might be able to throw some light on the mysterious disappearance.

"Oh, yes, that was the name, Mrs. Crowningshield, but it clean went out of my head. You see, miss, when a man gits old his mem'ry ain't w'ot it used fer to be."

"Wal, if you'll be so kind as to tell her that old Mister Jones has come—"

"I can't tell her, she isn't here!" exclaimed the landlady, abruptly, for she was a little disappointed, for, although without any reason whatever, she had the suspicion that this disreputable old man might be able to throw some light on the mystery.

"Oh, she's gone out; wal, I'll have to come ag'in, then, or I'll wait if you think she'll be home soon."

"I don't know anything about it; she didn't tell me when she went, and I don't know when she'll be back. It's no use for you to wait, for there's no telling when she'll come."

Old Lead Pencil nearly staggered off the step at this blow, although he had expected that something was amiss.

It was with no assumed agitation then that he spoke:

"You don't tell me so, ma'am? Oh, how unlucky!" he exclaimed. "An' she told me to be sure an' come this afternoon, too."

The curiosity of the widow at this point got the better of her aversion to tramps, and so she condescended to ask for an explanation.

The story that Old Lead Pencil told was reasonable enough.

"I'm quite a poor man, miss, with a large family, and I have a hard time to get along, an' as I was comin' up the street, jest a little ways down from here yesterday, I see'd a lady drop her wallet."

"I picked it up an' ran arter her. She give me a dollar for my trouble, an' when I thanked her an' told her how good it would come in, 'cos I have an awful time to git bread for my young 'uns, she axed me all 'bout myself, an' arter I up an' told her the hull story, she sed if I would come up here this afternoon she'd speak to some friends who would give me a lift. P'haps if I saw her husband he might be able to do something for me. She said as how she would speak to him."

"He's not here; he just went away, taking his baby with him. You see, Mrs. Crowningshield has gone away, quite suddenly, on some important business, I presume, and as I don't know anything about her coming back I can't give you any information."

It was with great difficulty that Old Lead Pencil repressed the inclination he felt to grit his teeth and swear.

The truth was evident. Like the vicious cow, his "daisy gal" had kicked over the pail of rich milk for which his mouth watered.

"Mebbe she left some message or a letter for me, miss," he suggested, doing his best to keep his temper.

"Oh, no, she didn't!" asserted the landlady in the most positive manner.

"There isn't any one but myself in the house to whom she would be apt to intrust a message, and she never said a word to me."

"In fact I never knew she was gone until this morning when I heard her child cry and went up to her room to see what the matter was."

"An' you're quite sure she didn't leave no letter?" persisted the old man, "cos she was so earnest 'bout my coming this afternoon."

"Quite positive, my good man," responded Mrs. Doncaster, with becoming dignity. "If there had been a letter I should most certainly have seen it. She left a note for her husband, but that was all," and she stepped backward as if to signify that it was time for the other to depart.

Old Lead Pencil took the hint.

With a profusion of thanks to the lady for her civility he retreated, and the widow closed the door.

The old man was so enraged that he could hardly restrain himself.

He wanted to swear and to yell, to dance up and down in the street and behave himself like an idiot generally; and as it was he muttered so loud to himself and gesticulated so violently that almost every one that passed gave him a wide berth thinking that he was a trifle touched in the upper story.

"She's bolted, by the holy smoke!" he muttered.

"Bolted rather than pay me my leetle fifty chocks a week! the ungrateful baggage!"

"Threw up a couple of million jist to be revenged on me! Cut an' run an' left the kid jist to git squar' on me! Oh, if I ever run across her ag'in I'll murder her though I hang for it!" raved the old man as he walked toward Washington street.

CHAPTER VII.

THE SEARCH.

FEW words passed between the nephew and uncle during their homeward passage, but just before they reached the house the old gentleman remarked:

"We must keep this matter as private as possible, Howard. I shouldn't like to see our old family name paraded in the newspapers accompanied by all kinds of ribald comments."

"Decidedly not!" exclaimed the other, flushing at the bare idea of having the affliction that had fallen so heavily upon him made known to the world at large.

"I don't know much about children," observed the old bachelor with a grimace as he looked at the child, clinging so closely to its father, and gazing around in wonder with its large, blue eyes. "But I presume this little chap can't talk much as yet."

"No, about the only words he pronounces at all plain are, mamma and papa," and the lips of the strong man quivered as he spoke the words which so forcibly recalled to his memory the woman who had treated him so cruelly.

"We must take measures to stop all gossip, you know. The fact of your marriage is not known?"

"No, only to my two chums, Endicott and Winslow, and they will be as silent as the grave if I so request."

"But no one of us three seldom have a secret which is not known to the others, I revealed my marriage to them and now that I am confronted with this mystery I think it will be wise to confide in them and ask their advice."

"Most decidedly!" exclaimed the old captain. "Both of them have old heads on young shoulders and their counsel will be valuable."

"Do you mind telling me what you think of doing in this matter?"

"Certainly not, for I depend upon you for advice as I have ever since I was a little boy."

"Possibly if I had not kept this matter a secret from you—the only time in my life that I ever did such a thing—I might have been spared this calamity."

"Well, well, that's all past and gone now. There isn't the least bit of use to cry over spilt milk."

"True, boy true."

"The question now is what is best to be done in the future?"

"Yes; well, uncle, I am weak enough to believe that the woman I have loved so well, is not so bad as this rash act on her part would seem to imply."

"I cannot bring myself to believe that she would fly from and desert her child of her own free will. She did not seem to be the kind of woman who would do such a thing."

"There wasn't anything passionate or wild about her, being unusually old and sedate for one of her years."

"Connected with her early life there was some slight mystery; it related to her parents who both died when she was but a child."

"I always fancied, uncle, that she did not tell all she knew, or suspected, in regard to this matter, but that was her secret—hers long before I ever saw her face, and I did not think that it was fair to press her to disclose it to me."

"That was correct, perfectly correct," the captain remarked with an approving nod of the head.

"She was always so quiet—so reserved—so perfectly the lady that this wild flight is to me unaccountable."

"Although not at all demonstrative, yet I am sure she loved me as well as she could possibly love any one, but by nature she was cold and incapable of expressing her affection as women usually do."

"Therefore I cannot account for her flight on the hypothesis that she has fallen in love with some other man and by his persuasions been induced to desert her home, husband and child."

"That is usually the reason for such flights."

"True, but I cannot believe that it is so in this case. The letter she left has a plaintive ring to it. It seems to me like a message from one being forced away from home and friends."

"She was a strange creature in many respects; often have I sat and gazed upon her when she was in her silent moods—she would sit sometimes for an hour, without speaking, a vacant look upon her face, her thoughts plainly far away—and asked myself if there was not danger that some time madness might seize upon my treasure."

"Now if there was some dark mystery overshadowing her early life it would account for these fits of abstraction; that mystery may have risen from the ghostly past and assumed such a shape that she, poor, weak child, incapable of coping with the world, may have thought herself obliged to flee from husband and child."

"Or, again, her mind may have given way and in a temporary fit of insanity the delusion came that she must hide herself away from those whom she loved best."

"In nearly all cases of insanity, you know, the insane person generally manifests a hatred toward the ones whom in a state of reason he had loved the best."

"Very true; well, to come back to the point that I was about to make," the uncle observed.

"No one knows that you are married; if you take this child to the house—and of course, under the circumstances you could not bear to be separated from it—and announce that it is yours, the natural query in regard to its mother will at once arise."

"Now, as the case stands, you don't want to reveal the truth, and then again, it's unpleasant to descend to falsehood about the matter."

"I haven't spoken to a soul about your marriage, so your secret is perfectly safe. Now how would it do to say that it is the child of a relative of mine, which I think of adopting."

"That would immediately put a stop to all gossip, as far as you are concerned, and no one will be apt to say anything to me about the matter, for I am not in the habit of allowing such liberties."

"The idea is an excellent one."

"And then, if we succeed in finding your wife and everything is all right, so that she can come and live with us, it will be easy to pass the matter off as a joke."

"Uncle, I will never be able to repay all your kindness to me!" exclaimed the young man, visibly affected.

"Well, well, don't say a word about it, my boy," replied the old captain, with suspicious traces of moisture about his eyes.

"All I'm sorry for, is that you didn't confide in me before. If I had been acquainted with the matter from the beginning, I think I could have saved you from this trouble, but then we all make mistakes once in a while."

By this time they were at the captain's residence, and as they ascended the steps, the pair perceived Miss Hancock at the window.

This was the girl that the old captain had hoped his nephew would marry.

Letitia Hancock she was called, the only child and heir of the late Judge John Hancock, who had died, leaving a million or so of clean cash behind him.

The judge and the old captain had been the greatest of friends, and as Letitia's mother had gone to a better world when she was about twelve years old, the judge, on his death-bed, had made the captain her guardian.

So, when she was fifteen, she had become one of the members of the Crowningshield household.

She was twenty-three now, a tall, stately beauty, with regular features, purely classical in their outlines, with golden brown hair, so long, that in its rich profusion it reached to her knees when unbraided, and great, gray eyes, clear and full.

With wonder in her face, the girl met the two as they entered the hall.

"Oh, uncle!" Letitia exclaimed, for so she always called the captain. "Where did you get that beautiful baby?"

"It's a distant relative of mine, one that I think of adopting," answered the old gentleman.

Just before reaching the house, the captain had taken the baby from the father.

"Oh, won't that be delightful!" exclaimed the girl, and then taking the baby from the captain, she carried it into the parlor, snuggled it up in one of the cushioned easy-chairs and then knelt down before it in admiration.

The young man had followed and stood behind her.

The parlor mirror was before them, and in it the girl caught a full view of the grave face of Howard.

She glanced at the child and then again at the features of the young artist.

Her face became deadly white, she drew a long breath and pressed her hand upon her heart as though stricken by a sudden pain.

As she had gazed upon the two faces, a sudden suspicion—a conviction—had flashed upon her.

The shock came so suddenly and unexpectedly that for a moment it fairly took her breath away.

She was a brave girl though and recovered her self-possession so quickly that neither of the gentlemen noticed her agitation.

"It is a lovely child!" she exclaimed, the color now flaming again into her cheeks; "what's its name?"

"Its name, ahem—" said the captain non-plused.

"Adonis, you said, I think, uncle," said the young man hastening to the rescue.

"Ah, yes, I never can remember any outlandish name."

"Well, it's a beautiful boy, and you'll let me take care of him, will you not, uncle?" exclaimed the girl persuasively. "You see I know all about taking care of children. I always took care of my little brother until that cruel fever came and took him away."

"Certainly, Letitia, if you care to undertake the trouble," the captain answered. "I will get a nurse and if you will superintend matters it will save me from calling upon Mrs. Moore for aid."

This lady was the housekeeper, an old servant, one of a grim puritanical stamp, of whom all the household, including even the captain stood a little in awe.

"Its clothes are in this bundle and you can purchase anything else he needs."

"Oh, I'll take care of him; he's a dear little fellow, and he will be a regular plaything for me."

And then she carried the baby off, almost smothering it with kisses, but the little fellow was not at all disposed to resent the treatment, for he crowed with delight and with his baby fingers, clutched at her glossy hair.

But happy as the girl was with her new toy, her eyes were filled with tears as she left the room.

The uncle and nephew soon decided upon a plan of operation.

The chief of police of the city was a personal friend of the captain and his counsel was immediately sought.

That official quickly came to a conclusion in regard to the matter. The woman was an adventuress and a fraud, but as he saw that the Crowningshields were not inclined to accept that view, he did not press it upon them.

The search was in vain; not the slightest clew was gained in regard to her although all the most expert of the private detectives in the city were called into the case as well as the regular men on the police force.

The tawny siren who had ensnared the heart of young Crowningshield had disappeared as utterly, and left as little trace behind her, as though she had been carried off by some evil spirit of the air.

The husband bore his disappointment manfully.

"I shall never give up the search, uncle," he said to the captain, "until I ascertain what has become of her. I cannot make up my mind to believe that she is a vile, bad woman who has

cruelly trifled with my affections and deserted her child."

"I will not falter in the search while life remains, and when my boy grows old enough I will devote his life to the chase."

CHAPTER VIII.

ON THE TRACK AGAIN.

AND now we'll wave the enchanter's wand which by right the story-teller wields and move the hands of the clock of time a good nine years along.

Again we write of Boston our modern Athens and the time is nine years later than the date of the events related in our previous chapter.

During these nine years the young husband had never relaxed in his efforts to unravel the mystery which had cast such a gloom over his life.

He had given up his artistic career.

The bluff old captain had said:

"Here, there isn't any use of your wasting your time over your painting while you are anxious to get at the secret of your wife's disappearance. I have always intended that you should be my heir and as an earnest I'll settle two hundred thousand dollars on you."

"It's all well invested and the interest will amount to about ten thousand dollars a year, which will afford you ample money to prosecute your search."

The young man thanked the old gentleman for his kindness, and the captain further remarked:

"I'm terribly afraid that if you do get at the truth you'll find she is not, and never has been, worthy of the affection which you have bestowed upon her. Ah, Howard, if you could only have made up your mind to fall in love with Letty here, she would have made a happy man of you."

By "Letty" the old gentleman meant Letitia. That young lady, despite the suspicions which he entertained in regard to the child's parentage, which suspicions would have been calculated to make the majority of girls who felt toward a man as she did toward Howard Crowningshield, hate the very sight of the child, looked after the little Adonis and loved it like a mother.

And although the lady had attained the age of thirty-two, and was still unmarried, having said "no" to a half a hundred more or less desirable suitors, yet still held her youth and beauty so well that she did not seem to be a day older than when we first introduced her to the reader's notice. And the child, Adonis, he had grown to be a fine healthy lad with the most beautiful golden curls, so noticeable that his pet name among all his acquaintances was Goldenlocks.

And as Adonis Goldenlocks he was about as well known as by his own proper appellation.

He was a bright, intelligent lad, shrewd beyond his years and with a quaint, odd way about him that often astonished his father.

The child had been brought up to call the artist "papa," for the captain, wishing to have it so and yet give a reasonable explanation for it, declared that he was too old to be the father of such a young 'un and so Howard must be the papa, and he would be his uncle, while Miss Hancock could be his aunt.

When the boy was ten years old he was so intelligent and knew so much more than the generality of boys at his age that the father came to the conclusion he was old enough to be entrusted with the secret connected with his mother, and so, taking the lad into his studio one day, where upon the wall hung a life-size portrait of the girl who had once called herself Roxanna Merivale, painted from memory, but a most accurate likeness, he revealed to him the mystery which enshrouded his mother.

The child listened attentively, an old head on young shoulders, and when the artist had finished, he said:

"We must find mamma, papa, 'cos I don't believe that my mamma would run away from us unless some bad people made her go."

"We will search the wide world over, my boy!" the father exclaimed, deeply affected by the speech, for it seemed to him as if this innocent child must be a prophet when he announced his trust in his mother.

"And when we once commence we will never give it up until we discover the truth; but you are too young now to accompany me. In two years, though, you will be twelve, and then we will set out on our quest, and know no rest until we accomplish it."

"And until then, papa, I'll be on the watch all the time," the child remarked in his deliberate way. "For mamma might not know that we are living, and I might see her pass by some day."

"Yes, that would be a good idea," and he kissed the smooth forehead of the bright boy, and the thought ran through his mind that if the mother could only once look upon his face, no power on earth would be able to keep her from him if she was not the most vile and worthless of womankind.

That afternoon Adonis was on the Common, as the noble and ancient park of Boston is called, which possessed the great advantage of being situated in the very heart of the city, being bounded by Beacon street on one side and Tremont on the other.

He was watching the boys sail their miniature boats on the frog-pond—to give the little sheet of water in the center of the Common its old-time name—when an old, disreputable-looking man who held some lead-pencils in his hand, came shambling up to him.

"Say, sonny, don't yer want to help a poor old man along by buying a lead-pencil?" he asked, surveying the boy's face as he spoke with a curious look.

"No, thank you, sir," replied the boy, who had been brought up to treat a beggar as politely as a king. "I have plenty of lead-pencils at home."

"Lemme see," remarked the old man in a reflective sort-of-way.

"It 'pears to me as if I'd seen you afore somewhere."

"Don't you live over yonder on Beacon street?"

"Yes, sir," responded the lad, who was not particularly impressed by the looks of the old fellow, yet saw no harm in replying to a civil question.

"Yes, yes, I knowed I'd seen you afore, though you were only a babby then. Yer name is Crowningshield, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Oh, I knowed I knew yer. I used fer to know yer mother onc't."

"My mother!" exclaimed the lad eagerly, unable to express his curiosity.

"Aha! that hits you where you live, don't it?" and the old tramp, who was no other than our ancient friend, Old Lead Pencil, chuckled gleefully.

"Yes, yes, I know'd yer mother an' a nasty trick she played me too, onc't, but that's neither here nor there, 'cos I reckon I'll live long enuff fer to git squar' with her fer it."

"Say, has yer pop found out w'ot ever become of yer mother?"

By this question, so abruptly put, the boy saw that the strange old man knew all about his mother's mysterious disappearance, and so he judged that it would not be of any use for him to display any reserve about the matter, and then, too, the idea had occurred to him that it was possible the old tramp might be able to give him some information in regard to his mother.

So he answered frankly.

"No, sir, he has never heard anything about her."

"He's tried his level best to hunt her up, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir."

"An' couldn't work the trick, nohow?"

"No, sir."

"He ought to have hunted me up. I'm the man, I reckon, w'ot could have put him on the right track an' no mistake, 'cos I'm a reg'lar bloodhound, I am. My name is Old Lead Pencil, an' I'm a rounder from Rounderville."

"I'm sure papa would be very glad to see you," Adonis exclaimed.

"Oh, I'm the man he's lookin' for. Why I kin' take you now where you'll have a chance to see yer mother, but you see there wouldn't be any use of my doing that, 'cos you wouldn't know her if you did see her."

"Yes, yes, I would!" cried the boy, eagerly.

"Yer would?" exclaimed Old Lead Pencil, astonished.

"Yes, sir; papa painted a picture of mamma, and he says it's just like her and I'm sure I would know her anywhere!"

"Are you game to come along with me an' take a squint at yer mamma as she rides by in her carriage, as gay as a queen?"

"Yes, sir; I'm not afraid to go."

"Aha, you're a spunky leetle chap—got more grit into yer than a long-tailed clam; that's w'ot I like to see. I ain't fond of milksop boys."

"You look kinder soft with yer golden curls, but I reckon you're more of a man than you look, so come along an' I'll soon show you, w'ot's the time o' day!"

The old man started toward Tremont street, and the boy trotted along by his side.

"Yer marm give me the slip jist 'bout the same time that she hoofed it from yer dad, an' I've been on the lookout for her ever since. I kinder had an idea that she would show up in Bostin here ag'in an' to-day for the first time I caught sight of her. She rode down Tremont street 'bout an hour ago, an' the chances are big that she'll be back soon."

When they arrived at the Tremont street side of the park, the old man and boy sat down upon a bench.

Hardly had they done so, when a handsome open carriage containing a gentleman and lady drove by, and the boy immediately recognized in the lady the original of the picture of his mother.

"Mamma, mamma!" he cried at the top of his voice, jumping on the bench in his excitement.

The lady, who was sitting on the side of the carriage nearest to the Common, looked directly at the two, though, and Old Lead Pencil felt satisfied that they had not escaped her observation, although she did not manifest by any sign that she had perceived them.

She was magnificently dressed, and everything about her and the gentleman who sat by her side, handling the reins, as well as the magnificent turn-out, gave indication of wealth.

In appearance, she was the perfect image of the picture which the young artist had painted of his beautiful wife.

And though it was nearly nine years since the portrait had been painted, the lady in the carriage did not look to be a day older, and her beauty really exceeded that of the picture.

The gentleman was a stout, rather rough-looking man, well advanced in years, a man over fifty; with a round, bullet-like head; coarse, strongly-marked features; small, deep-set eyes, a light, uncertain blue in color; scanty iron-gray hair, and a bristling mustache, with a pointed chin beard of the same hue.

Despite his coarse, really rough appearance, he was dressed in the best that money could buy, and upon his little finger and in the bosom of his shirt, sparkled a pair of twin diamonds worth a good five thousand dollars of anybody's money.

And there was that peculiar air about the man, too—the arrogance which comes from the possession of power and wealth.

The carriage disappeared amid the vehicles in the distance, and little Goldenlocks resumed his seat upon the bench, shaking his head in a thoughtful way.

Old Lead Pencil watched him with eager eyes; the odd way of the thoughtful boy puzzled him.

"Wal, w'ot do yer think of yer marm?" he asked. "That's her, ain't it?"

"Oh, yes, sir, I am sure it is my mamma, 'cos she looks just like the picture which hangs in papa's studio. I would know her anywhere!"

"She looked our way, but she didn't make no sign as how she recognized us," the old tramp remarked in a reflective sort of way.

"Yes, sir, I'm sure she saw us, and though I cried out mamma as loud as I could, yet the carriages and horses made so much noise, that I don't suppose she heard me, and then I don't think she'd know me now, for she hasn't seen me since I was a little baby, and I'm a big boy," and the little fellow rose to his feet and drew himself up to his full height as he spoke.

"Oh, no, she wouldn't know you, of course, but she would know me," and Old Lead Pencil indulged in a cunning leer.

"Would she?" and the boy appeared a little incredulous as he surveyed his disreputable companion.

"You bet she would!" Old Lead Pencil answered promptly.

"Oh, yer needn't to squint at me," he continued, quick to notice the incredulous look upon the face of the boy.

"I didn't allers go 'round like this 'ere. I was a first-class gentleman onc't, an' yer kin bet all yer wealth on it, a reg'lar howling swell, but I went through a lot of misfortunes an' got pulled down. I was sick with the rheumatics for nigh onto ten years, an' 'bout all that time, off an' on, I was in a hospital."

"My relations got away with my money, an' nobody was willing to do anything for me, an' when a man ain't got no friends an' no money, an' ain't able for to do any hard work besides, he's likely to have a mighty hard row to hoe in this 'ere world."

"I suppose so," remarked the lad, compassionately.

"An' then, when I couldn't get anything else to do, I took up this 'ere lead-pencil game, an' I manage to get a livin' out of it."

"Tain't much of a livin', yer know. I don't git many quails on toast, or many hacks at roast turkey with oyster sauce, an' the amount of champagne I git away with in the course of a year wouldn't drown a good-sized fly."

"I don't dine at the Parker House either, an' a ten-cent bed in a cheap lodging-house is good-enough for me, so I don't patronize the Revere, or the Hotel Vendome as much as I used to. But it's hard lines for an old fakir who has been through the wars, an' I'd put a stop to it years ago if yer marm hadn't gone back on me; but this time I reckon I will play the game so keerfully as to get her dead to rights," and the ugly expression which came over his battered features as he uttered the words, caused the boy to open his eyes with wonder.

Just at this point a couple of well-dressed gentlemen who had been promenading along the walk coming from the direction of Boylston street, had their attention directed to the old man and the child, and they immediately came up to the two, halting before them.

As we have said, both were fashionably attired, and bore the appearance of men who amounted to something.

One, the taller of the two, was a finely-proportioned, muscular fellow, with a rather good-looking face, excepting that it had a rough appearance, as though its owner had been exposed to the fury of the elements in following some out-door life like a sailor's.

There were faint lines here and there too, as

though the face had been bruised and battered at some time, but the marks were barely visible.

An attack of the feature-disfiguring small-pox would be apt to produce similar results.

His companion was smaller in stature and more slender in build, but a handsome fellow with a jaunty air.

He had coal-black hair, which clustered in little crispy curls all over his well-shaped head. His eyes were black and brilliant, his features regular, the mouth shaded by a luxuriant jet-black mustache, and altogether he was what an admiring girl would call "a darling of a fellow."

His hands were singularly white and the fingers long and slender, and he carried himself with the languid, careless air of a well-bred man of fortune, a complete contrast to his companion, who had a brisk, commanding way with him.

"Hallo, you old humbug! What are you up to?" demanded the tall man who answered to the name of Michael Donegan, although among the men who knew him best he was far better known as Curly Kid than by his own proper appellation.

But it was a strange fact that even among those who were most accustomed to using this nickname when speaking of him, the reason for applying such an odd name was not known.

He always wore his sandy hair cut short, but if it was allowed to grow, it curled as tightly almost as a negro's wool and this in his youth gave him the nickname, which had stuck to him as tightly as his baptismal appellation.

His companion boasted a much more aristocratic appellation, being known as Raymond Randolph, and the peculiarity of the name, the alliteration, led to the suspicion that it was not his own but an assumed appellation; the gentleman, however, always protested strongly against this assumption.

"So help me Bob, guv'nor, I ain't up to nothin'," whined the old man, betraying by his manner that he stood in awe of the questioner.

"I wouldn't take your word for that," responded the other, transfixing the tramp with his steady gaze. "I never ran across you yet when you wasn't up to some mischief."

And then he took a good look at the boy, who met his gaze fearlessly enough, for there wasn't anything about the gentleman to excite his apprehensions.

"What is your name, my little man?" he asked.

"Adonis, sir, Adonis Crowningshield."

"Ah, yes, I thought I knew you. Your uncle, old Captain Crowningshield, lives over yonder on Beacon street, doesn't he?"

"Yes, sir."

"And what are you doing here with this man?"

With a warning look Old Lead Pencil endeavored to caution the boy not to tell, but the other had his eyes upon him and put a stop at once to the maneuver.

"None of that!" he exclaimed, "or I'll be obliged to be ugly!"

The old tramp shivered and feebly protested that he wasn't doing anything, but the other only smiled contemptuously.

Little Goldenlocks, who didn't see any reason why he should keep the matter a secret, answered readily enough:

"He brought me to see my mamma, who went away when I was a baby, and papa has been looking for her ever since."

"And did you see her?"

"Yes, sir, she just went by in a carriage; maybe you saw her, sir, a beautiful lady with golden hair just like mine?"

Curly Kid took a good look at the boy and then he shook his head.

"No, I didn't notice her, but you had better run home now, sonny, and you, you old black-guard, you just get out, for I think you are up to some mischief."

Adonis did not dream of disobeying the command and started across the common, while Old Lead Pencil slunk away in the direction of Park street.

He knew he could get at the boy at any time and he was too well acquainted with Curly Kid to dare to disobey his orders.

The two gentlemen followed slowly behind him and when Old Lead Pencil discovered that they were apparently watching him, he went out of the Common, hailed a car, got on board and so disappeared.

Curly Kid watched until the car was lost in the distance and then he spoke, rapidly, to his companion.

"Ray, you are down on your luck, ain't you?"

"Oh, yes, I'm regularly cleaned out, and in that state of mind that if I owned a pistol I would as lieve put it to my head and make a die of it as not."

"Ray, you were always afraid to go into anything outside of cards and dice, but if I show you a chance to make a big stake now have you got the sand to try for it, even though you risk ten years or so in the Stone Jug if the thing is a failure?"

"How big a stake?"

"From ten to twenty thousand dollars!"

"Count me in! I'll risk it for once in my life!"

"We must 'ake a short cut then and intercept the boy!"

CHAPTER IX. CURLY KID.

THE carriage was proceeding at a rapid pace, though, and as there were quite a number of other vehicles in the street, the voice of little Goldenlocks was partially drowned by the noise made by the horse's hoofs and the wheels.

CHAPTER X.

A GREAT GAME.

"THE old bummer has got out of the way," Curly Kid continued.

"Such vermin as he is don't like to be watched and that is the reason why I followed so closely on his heels.

"That maneuver gave him the idea that I was on his track and he made all possible haste to get out of the way."

"Remember what the poet says about 'The tyrant, Conscience, that doth make cowards of us all,'" remarked Randolph.

"That's the idea exactly, but here's a cross-path and by walking briskly we can intercept the boy."

The two turned into the path indicated by Curly Kid and as they proceeded at a sharp walk, he went on to explain to his companion the design which he had formed.

"Some of the best tricks that I have ever taken in my life have come to me just by accident," he observed as a commencement.

"I believe that is generally the case with everybody," the other remarked.

"Now in regard to this matter I should not have caught on to it if Old Lead Pencil hadn't happened to get on the 'boose' last night in Irish Kate's den. Perhaps you are not acquainted with that high-toned resort."

"No, I am not."

"Oh, it's the boss place for the boys, I tell you! You can strike more first-class 'High Toby' men in there in the course of a day than you can scare up anywhere in the country outside of a State prison."

"It must be a delightful resort."

"It is, and it's the place to hear the news and find out what is on the carpet."

"She's got quite a large place; there is a bar in front, and on the other side of the room from the bar is a row of oyster boxes, little rooms, you know, with curtains in front and small partitions separating one from the other, about seven feet high."

"Kate runs a sort of a restaurant too, you know, on a small scale."

"I was in the end box next to the rear wall, which is my usual resort, getting a drink and a bite to eat. It was close to midnight when this Old Lead Pencil and another bum about as bad, came into the next box."

"Both of them were pretty full, for Old Lead Pencil and his pal had made a lucky haul."

"In their perambulations they had stumbled upon a drunken man asleep in a doorway, and as there wasn't any one around to interfere, they relieved him of his wealth, which consisted of over ten dollars in clean cash, and as a natural result the two went on the biggest kind of a jamboree, set out to paint the town red, you know, and all that sort of thing."

"Which, in the case of such a fellow as this vile ruffian, means pouring down his throat of all the bad whisky that he can manage to get hold of."

"Your description of the process is singularly exact," Curly Kid remarked.

"Well, for once in his life, the old blackguard had whisky enough on board to make him talkative, and while they were eating their oysters and drinking their liquor—they had been extravagant enough to order a whole bottle of whisky—in the fullness of his enjoyment the other old tramp remarked that the lucky discovery of the drunken man was one of the biggest tricks that he had taken for a long time."

"Then Old Lead Pencil, in a mysterious way, intimated that he was going to work a game with a thousand ten-dollar tricks, and when his companion expressed his amazement at the statement, Old Lead Pencil gave enough away to put me on the scent."

"In brief, there's some woman in this city upon whom the old bummer thinks he has a claim; apparently she won't have it."

"He got after her some nine or ten years ago, but she upset his trick by clearing out, and he hasn't seen or heard anything about her until last week, and then by accident he happened to run across her."

"She's well-fixed now it seems—worth a million—and Old Lead Pencil calculates to grab a portion of it."

"There's a child in the case, a boy, whom this woman deserted when she fled in the long ago."

"The boy's father is one of the nob's of the city and his uncle is worth half a million."

"That's a nice little amount; I think I would be content with that."

"No doubt," responded Curly Kid, dryly.

"Well, the child's father is anxious to find the mother, who, it appears, has married again, though why she fled from a husband who was so well-fixed, and deserted her child, is not apparent. I presume Old Lead Pencil knows, but he didn't give that away."

"Old Lead Pencil's game now is to make a big stake out of either the mother or the father, by means of the child in some way."

"About this point, too, his language was obscure, and I didn't 'catch on.' I listened to the thing of course, for I always make it my business to pick up all the information I can, for

there's no knowing when it may prove useful, but I didn't at the time see that it particularly interested me in any way, and then, too, I had a suspicion that the whole thing was a fraud from beginning to end."

"Yes, the man might have been lying and the story only a coinage of his brain."

"I had an idea that it was rather fishy, but now since my encounter with the old man and the boy, thanks to what I heard last night I hold the key to the whole thing in my hands. Don't you remember my speaking of a beautiful woman who, in company with an elderly man, drove past us in a buggy just before we came up to the bummer?"

"Yes, but I didn't notice her particularly. I only saw the back of her head and caught sight of her diamonds as they swung in the air," the other answered.

"And they are daisy sparklers too, old fellow, no humbug about them; they are the genuine article and no mistake; and the ring and pin that the old buffer wears too are not to be sneezed at. I've cracked many a crib in my time, risking both liberty and life without any chance to get away with so much swag as them sparklers would be."

"That woman is the mother of the boy, I think. In fact I feel so sure that I'd be willing to gamble on it. I noticed a peculiar expression on her face as she passed, and that was produced I reckon by the unexpected sight of the boy."

"Why, the moment I looked in his face I saw what a striking resemblance he bore to the woman, and then when he told that he had come with Old Lead Pencil to see his mother, what I had overheard the old scoundrel say last night flashed upon me, and Ray, old fellow, I tumbled to the bummer's little racket immediately and then all of a sudden the idea flashed into my head that I could make a big stake myself in the affair and beat the Old Lead Pencil out of his trick."

"Well, as I said, I did not see the face of the woman, but there was something about the boy's features that seemed familiar to me," Randolph remarked, slowly, evidently trying to recall where it was that he had seen the person whom the boy resembled.

"Maybe you've seen this woman somewhere!" the other suggested.

"Possibly so; if I had seen her face I could have told. But who is she?"

"Her name is Mrs. Judge Jefferson Jones, I don't know what her first name is. The matter did not interest me at all so I did not take the trouble to inquire."

"Old Jeff Jones, her husband—Judge Jones as they generally call him, is one of the big copper men from up around Lake Superior."

"Owns sixteen or eighteen mines, you know, and is one of the biggest toads in the puddle. The headquarters of some of his mines are in Boston and he has spent the winter here ringing in new suckers to take the place of the old ones, whose cash he has exhausted."

"The world at large calls gentlemen in my line of business hard names, and when the public get us dead to rights, everybody sets up a great strut, and when we're railroaded into State Prison for ten years or so, then the world yells; 'Hustle 'em in so they can't contaminate honest men;' but when a regular old shark like this Jeff Jones rings in a cold deal on the public, by getting up a mining company to work a property that ain't worth shucks and then after he gets the pigeons in, plucks them until they are cleaned out, people rub their hands and say, 'Smart business man, Judge Jeff Jones; he knows how to turn his property to the best advantage.'"

"Why, Curly, you have mistaken your vocation!" Randolph exclaimed, laughing. "You were evidently cut out for a minister instead of a housebreaker, and a very king among the High Toby men."

"Oh, stow that! None of your gas!" the other replied.

"But it is a sure enough fact, all the same, whether a minister or a cracksman says it, these rich sharks, who make thousands by fleecing their dupes, are no better than the poor thieves who risk State Prison for the sake of picking up a few dollars, and when the Day of Judgment comes they'll find it out, too."

"But here, I'm getting away from my nut-ton. This is my game. I know all about the Joneses, for I've been watching for a chance to crack their crib for quite a while. The mother is there, and I'm well posted about the Crowningshields, for I've had a notion for quite a time that I might be able to pick up some few trifles there some dark night."

"And that is where the father is located."

"Now, then, the boy is the key to the whole situation, and whoever has him has the game in his hand."

"Now my little trick is to tell the boy that I can take him to his mother, so induce him to come with me and quietly lug him off."

"Come, old fellow, what do you think. A pretty good chance that either mother or father, both of whom are rich, will stand a pull of about ten thousand for the return of the child?"

"But this is abduction, Curly, you know—dangerous work."

"Nothing venture nothing win. Come, are you in?"

"Yes, I'll go it."

"Good. And there's the boy now."

CHAPTER XI.

ENTRAPPED.

LITTLE GOLDENLOCKS had walked slowly along, meditating upon the strange things which had occurred to him.

That the lady in the carriage was the exact image of the picture of his mamma which his father had painted he was certain, but then it might not be his mamma, after all.

She looked straight at him as she rode by, but did not seem to recognize him.

"But I was only a little boy when she went away," he murmured, "and, of course, she wouldn't know me now, that I have grown to be a big boy."

Went papa be astonished, though, when I tell him that I have seen a lady who looks exactly like the picture of mamma, and that old man said it was my mamma, too, but I don't know whether he knows my mamma or not."

"He don't look very nice—just like an old tramp, and his breath smells awful, too, and he hurried off when that gentleman told him to go, just as the street-boys do when they see the policeman coming."

And then the boy shook his head doubtfully, and it was evident that he did not put much faith in the words of Old Lead Pencil.

"I'll tell papa all about it, and perhaps he'll know whether it was mamma or not," he said, in conclusion.

By this time he had reached the Frog Pond again, and encountered Curly Kid and Randolph, who by means of the cross-path had managed to reach that point before the boy.

Goldenlocks, busy with his meditations, had walked quite slowly, and had not noticed that the men were hurrying to intercept him.

"Hallo, here's my little man now!" exclaimed Curly Kid, in his pleasant way, as he encountered the lad.

"And I'm glad I met you, too, for I know where your mother lives, and I made up my mind that I would take you to her the next time I saw you."

"When you told me why you had come with that old rascalion, for the moment I didn't remember that I was well acquainted with your mother, that is, if that lady with the golden hair and blue eyes, who drove by with the old gentleman in the buggy, is your mother."

"Yes, sir, that's the one!" exclaimed Little Goldenlocks, eagerly.

"Well, my boy, I knew there was some mystery about the lady, but I didn't know exactly what it was," Curly Kid said in his easy, plausible way.

He was a fellow who had succeeded in pulling the wool over the eyes of sharp business men in his time, and it was no wonder that the innocent child was deceived into the belief that he was fully to be trusted.

"The old gentleman that you saw her with is a stern old fellow, and there isn't any doubt in my mind that he had something to do with your mother's mysterious disappearance."

"Yes, sir," said Goldenlocks, "he looked cross."

When the man spoke so confidently in regard to the matter, how could the boy doubt that he knew all the particulars?

"Now then, my lad, if you'll come along with me, I think I can get you into the house without the old gentleman's knowing anything about it; and if you can get a chance to see your mother alone, I've no doubt that she will be able to recognize you."

"Oh, yes, sir, I will be glad to go!" the little fellow exclaimed, eager for the chance.

There was not the least bit of timidity in the boy's disposition; and then, too, Curly Kid played his part so well that it would have taken a wise head, indeed, to mistrust him.

"Well, let me see; I have to stop on Tremont street for a moment, and I'll tell you what to do. Do you know where the corner of Charles street and Boylston is?"

"Yes, sir."

"You trot along down there and wait for me on the corner, and I'll be along just as soon as I fix up this little business which I have to attend to. I won't keep you waiting long, and then I'll take you right to your mother, for I haven't the least doubt in the world that she is your mother."

"Now, you'll wait until I come?"

"Oh, yes, sir!" replied Little Goldenlocks, who had been infected by his father with the feverish desire to find the woman who had disappeared so mysteriously years before.

"Run along, then, and be sure to wait for me."

"Yes, sir, I will."

Off went the boy, and then the two men turned their steps again toward Tremont street.

"The hook is in his mouth, and we won't have any difficulty in landing our fish," Curly Kid remarked, with an air of satisfaction, to his companion.

"What's the programme now?" Randolph inquired.

"The work ahead for you is to get out to Moll Flaggon's as quickly as possible, and make arrangements to receive the boy.

"I will get a buggy and drive him out there, under the pretense that I am taking him to his mother."

"By Jove! but this is a bold game that you are going to play!" the other exclaimed.

"Of course, and that is where the chance of success comes in. The bigger the game, the better the chance. No five-cent ante for me, if you please. I believe in making a big strike, or none at all."

"There's a great deal of truth in that, beyond a doubt," the other remarked, thoughtfully.

"You're safe to bet all that you're worth on it. But be off with you now, while I hurry down Tremont street to the livery stable."

"By the way, don't give the snap away to Moll; merely tell her that I am bringing a party out to hide away for a week or so; for though there isn't the least doubt in my mind that she is true as steel to me, still it is always better that any such important secret as this one should be known to as few people as possible."

"Yes; but won't she be apt to learn the truth from the boy? He's a bright little fellow, you know, and perfectly able to tell his story," suggested Randolph.

"Oh, I have provided against that contingency," replied Curly Kid.

"I'm like a weasel, you know, and it isn't very often that you catch me napping."

"In the upper part of the old house is a secret chamber lit by a skylight in the roof, and it is so cunningly contrived that unless any one was posted in regard to its existence, it would never be suspected."

"And even if a man knew that there was such a room in the house, unless he had a good idea about its situation, it would require the keenest kind of a bloodhound to discover it."

"A valuable secret," Randolph remarked.

"Oh, yes; it has served my turn before now. Even Moll does not know exactly where it is situated, nor how to gain access to it."

"When I first put her in the house I told her that there was a secret room in it, but I thought it would be best not to reveal to her all the particulars in regard to it, so that, if there should be any trouble and the police came down upon the house, she would be able to tell them with a clear conscience that there wasn't anything about the house as far as she knew."

"And then, if the detectives disbelieved her, and went to searching the house, she would not by any unguarded movement betray the secret."

"The idea was a good one."

"There is a dumb-waiter, so that the boy's meals can be conveyed to him, a bed and all conveniences in the room; and when he is once in it he will be as completely hidden away as though he were in an uninhabited wilderness. Well, so long!"

"So long," replied the other, and they parted.

Randolph took his way to the Boston and Worcester railroad depot, while Curly Kid hurried up Tremont street to the livery stable which he was in the habit of patronizing.

From the stable he procured a horse and buggy, the livery-stable keeper glad to serve a patron who always paid promptly, never grumbled at the bill, and always brought the turnout back in excellent condition.

Of course the stableman had no idea of who his customer really was; he believed him to be "one of the boys," a fast man about town, but as about all of his best customers were men of that description, he regarded him with a high degree of respect.

In the buggy Curly Kid drove down to the corner where he had directed the boy to wait for him.

Little Goldenlocks was on the spot.

Curly Kid halted the buggy, the lad got in, and then the man started the horse again.

Down by the Public Garden he drove, then turned and went through to Tremont street, and then straight out toward Roxbury.

He explained to little Goldenlocks that his mother lived some distance out in the country, and then said, as if the thought had suddenly occurred to him:

"By the way, I guess you had better send a message to your papa, telling where you are gone, so that if he goes to look for you and is not able to find out where you are gone he will not be anxious about you."

"Oh, yes, that would be good," the boy replied, immediately falling into the trap so dexterously set.

"Write what you want to say and I will telegraph it for you at the first office we come to—you can write, I suppose?" and as he spoke, Curly Kid drew a small note-size pad from his pocket, together with a stylograph pen, and handed them to the boy.

"Yes, sir, I can write, and papa says I write very well for a boy at my age," Goldenlocks replied, taking the articles from the hands of the man.

"He will know your handwriting, then, when he sees it?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'll pull the horse up." He did so. "Now write."

"I'll just say I've gone out to see mamma, and will be back soon," said Goldenlocks.

"Capital, couldn't be better!"

The boy wrote the message, and the man tore the page off, folded it up and put it in his pocket. Passing through Roxbury he stopped at a telegraph station and pretended to send the message, but did not, as he had other use for it.

On then again they went, out into the pleasant open country, through roads and lanes with many a turn, and at last halted in front of an old-fashioned wooden house, which stood some distance from the road in the midst of an old-fashioned garden.

"Jump out now, and soon you'll see your mamma."

CHAPTER XII.

A BOLD DEFIANCE.

OLD LEAD PENCIL had boarded the street car just for the purpose of escaping from the espionage of Curly Kid, of whom he stood in mortal terror, and not without reason, for the accomplished cracksman suspected that upon a certain occasion the old bummer had managed to get an idea of a certain midnight expedition in which he was about to engage, and had straightway warned the police, and the result was that Curly Kid came within an ace of falling into a trap, and if the detectives had succeeded in their design, the boss cracksman would have secured lodgings at the State's expense. Ever since that time, Curly Kid had, to use the vulgar, had it in for Old Lead Pencil.

He had done his best to discover whether it was the old bummer or some other paltry ruffian who had betrayed him, but the police knew too much to "give the thing away," and so he gave Old Lead Pencil the benefit of the doubt and refrained from taking the summary vengeance which otherwise he would have inflicted.

It had come to the knowledge of the old man that Curly Kid suspected him of being a traitor, and though he had affected to be very indignant at the charge, yet he took pains to keep out of the way of the accomplished cracksman.

Wise was he in so doing, too, for once in a while Curly Kid got on what is popularly known as a "tear," and when in that state he was utterly reckless in regard to what he did.

After riding about a dozen blocks Old Lead Pencil got off the car.

During the brief trip he had settled upon a plan of operations.

"I might as well begin first as last," he had muttered to himself, as he thought the matter over, leaning against the railing of the car.

"She saw me to day an' she saw the boy, an' she knew both on us too. I could see that by the expression in her eyes, although the surprise didn't cause a muscle of her face to change."

"Oh, ain't she a wonderful woman? Ain't she got the cheek an' the sand an' all that sort of thing? Wal, you kin bet all yer rocks on it now."

"An' as she has got a warning that both the boy an' myself are in the land of the livin', the quicker I go for her to make a strike the better. The iron is hot now, why not go for a stake?"

And it was with this idea in his mind that he dismounted from the car.

But after he got on the sidewalk he took a look at himself.

"Oh, this won't do," he muttered as he looked at himself.

"This won't do at all. There won't be a mite of use of my going to the house a-lookin' this way. I'd never be able to get a chance to talk to her."

"The nigger at the door would take a squint at my clothes an' then my cake would be all dough. He'd neither let me in or take a message."

"I must wait until night; I don't show up so badly then. If it was a common kind of a house I might git a chance to slip in so as to have a talk with her without anybody knowing anything about it, but with that big, fat, sassy nig at the door, there ain't the least bit of a chance."

"I'll wait until night, anyhow."

So Old Lead Pencil betook himself to his accustomed haunts until the mantle of night should cover the earth.

The darkness came at last and then the old tramp made his way to the new territory which the city of Boston has stolen from the waters of the land-locked cove, known familiarly as the Back Bay.

He halted at last in front of a magnificent mansion on Commonwealth avenue.

Old Lead Pencil sat down upon a door-step on the opposite side of the street and surveyed the house, which was brilliantly lighted, for a few moments in silence and then all at once he burst forth:

"Durn me if it ain't enuff for to make a man want to tear 'round an' smash things!" he exclaimed.

"Jest look at it! Here am I a struggling with all my might an' main for to keep body an'

soul together, an' this ere little tiger-cat of a woman a-livin' like a queen."

"Oh if I can only get to talk to her won't I make her open her eyes?"

"She give me the slip nine years ago, but durn me if she runs that trick on me again. I've got her foul this time an' I'll make her pay well for all the trouble she's put me to."

"I might as well go over an' lay 'round the door," he added, after relieving his mind by shaking his clinched fist at the house for a moment.

"I kin see right through the glass of that inside door, and if I happened to catch sight of her a-passin' mebbe if I tapped on the glass she might be willin' to hear wot I've got for to say."

The idea seemed a good one and Old Lead Pencil proceeded to put it in execution.

He crossed the street, ascended the steps and passing through the outer portals, which were of solid wood and invitingly thrown open, peered through the glass of the inner door.

Luck favored the tramp; none of the servants were around and he had not watched more than a minute when the woman whom he sought descended the stair, robed in an evening dress of such surpassing beauty that it fairly made the old man stare.

"I'll be hanged if she ain't rigged out like a queen!" he muttered.

"Jest look at her diamonds; they sparkle enuff for to put a feller's eyes out. Oh, my beauty, you must come down an' give a cove about my size a chance at yer."

By this time the lady had reached the landing at the foot of the stairs and Old Lead Pencil, pressing his face against the glass of the window, tapped upon it with his grimy fingers.

"Now, will she see me or will she show fight an' call for the nig to throw me inter the street?" the old tramp muttered as he signaled to the lady.

Naturally she gave a slight start when the sound of the noise made by Old Lead Pencil's fingers fell upon her ears.

Halted, hesitated for a moment, casting a scrutinizing glance at the particularly unprepossessing face of the old man, and then advanced and opened the door, a questioning look upon her face.

"Aha, she don't dare to call the nigger," Old Lead Pencil muttered, as he saw the lady advance with the evident intention of opening the door. "She's afeard to provoke me an' I shall make a stake out of her arter all."

The old tramp screwed his features into what he intended to be a friendly grin, but the face of the lady was as devoid of any particular expression as the features of a marble statue.

She opened the door and fronted Old Lead Pencil.

"Well, Roxy, if I ain't glad to see you I wish I may die!" the old tramp declared advancing through the open doorway with outstretched hand.

A look of amazement appeared on the face of the lady and she retreated a couple of steps as the old man advanced as though she did not like the idea of coming in contact with her unsavory visitor.

"Sir?" she exclaimed in a tone of question.

Old Lead Pencil was bothered; this was not at all the reception he had expected, but of course he saw through the game at once.

She had determined to deny all knowledge of him, and the fact roused his wrath.

"Oh, you don't remember me?" he exclaimed, in what he endeavored to make a sarcastic manner.

"You've forgotten all 'bout me, I s'pose. Wal, if I had had the least idee that sich a thing would happen I would have brought a friend along fer to introduce me."

The old bummer was attempting to convey the idea that he was inclined to be humorous, but the effort was a sorry failure for his rage and disappointment were too great to be concealed.

"What do you wish, sir?" the lady demanded, and from the way in which she spoke as well as the expression on her face, it was plain that she regretted having opened the door.

"Why, I've come to see you, Roxy, that's all—come to make you a kind of a friendly visit, you know," Old Lead Pencil replied, striving to conceal his rage and appear as pleasant as possible.

"I happened just by accident to find out where you lived, and although you did give me the slip nine years ago, jest when I was a-calculating that I had everything fixed fer good and all, yet I ain't a-goin' to lay it up ag'in' you."

"You got yer peepers on the boy that was with me to-day; of course I s'pose you kin guess who he is, an' a beauty he has grown up to be too—"

"My good man, haven't you made some mistake?" the lady asked, using that peculiar tone which ordinary mortals generally adopt when addressing a fellow human who is believed to be a little touched in the upper story.

"Mistake!" snarled Old Lead Pencil, angrily, "wal, I guess not. I reckon that it is you that has made the mistake a-trying to make out that you don't know me."

"I certainly do not."

"Wot? do you mean to say that your name ain't Roxy Merivale?"

"Certainly not; I am Mrs. Judge Jones," the lady responded with dignity.

"Oh, I know all about that—I know that you have roped another sucker in, but you're Roxy Merivale all the same!" the old bummer exclaimed rudely, fairly losing his temper at being thus treated.

"How dare you address me in such a manner?" the lady exclaimed, indignantly. "You must be crazy; begone, sir, or I will call my servants to thrust you into the street!"

"Crazy!" exclaimed Old Lead Pencil, angrily. "Not a bit of it. It's you who are crazy or else you would never dare to attempt to defy me."

"You think that you are so strong now that you can laugh at me; I'm only a miserable old wreck, and nobody would be apt to believe anything I might say ag'in' such a lady as you are, but if I can't strike at you myself I can put somebody else on the track who kin; an' high as yer Judge Jones holds his head, this man is as good as he any day in the week, and that's Howard Crowningshield."

"I'll go straight to him an' tell a tale that will be mighty apt to make him open his eyes."

"Yes, my good man, I would," the lady replied in soothing tones. "Go right away, so I can shut the door."

This being treated like a crank maddened Old Lead Pencil.

"Think twice afore yer pull the house down on yer head!" he warned, withdrawing his foot from the threshold, and the lady took advantage of this to close the portal, and drawing down the inside curtain, disappeared from sight.

Almost choking with rage, the tramp descended to the street. "I'll give you away to Crowningshield this night!" he cried.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE BARGAIN.

NEVER in all this wide world was a man much more overcome with rage than was Old Lead Pencil, as he fairly staggered like a drunken man along the street after having been dismissed by the lady, who he was sure was she who had once been called Roxanna Merivale, in such a cavalier manner.

Nine years before, when she had tricked him by suddenly taking flight, he had been fearfully enraged at being so craftily duped; but now, when he had again hunted her down, to be openly defied—to be dismissed with the suggestion that he was crazy—was altogether too much.

It was adding insult to injury.

As a general thing, when the old bummer was enraged he swore like a trooper, but in the present case he felt that all the oaths that were ever invented would not do justice to the subject or soothe his outraged feelings.

Although passion raged so fiercely in every vein that he could not walk straight until he had cooled down a little, yet he did not swear and rage as usual. But his voice was husky, though with suppressed passion, as he went along muttering to himself.

"Defies me, does she?" he growled. "Makes out that she thinks I am crazy, an' calls me 'my good man,' jest like as if she was some princess, an' I wasn't nothin' but a beggar."

"She drives me from her door as though I was a dog—an' a dog she'll find me, too, when she feels my bite."

And then the old vagabond chuckled hoarsely, and clinched his fists and struck out at the air, as though he thought he was striking at the woman who had defied him.

"Oho! yer think ye'r' mighty smart, but mebbe you'll change yer mind afore you are many hours older."

"Crowningshield is no slouch; anybody can see that by lookin' at his face, and I'm a-bettin' all the ducats I kin scare up, which ain't much jest now, that he'll give my lady the liveliest tussle she ever had in her life, an' won't an old man 'bout my size be glad of it? Oh, no, not much!"

And so, communing with himself now swearing vengeance against the woman who had tricked him, and then chuckling over the thought that Crowningshield would avenge him in the most ample manner, he proceeded straight to the house of that gentleman.

Walking up the front steps, he rung the bell with the air of a man who felt sure of his welcome.

Howard Crowningshield himself came to the door.

There was an anxious look upon his face, and he gazed inquiringly at the old tramp.

"This is Mister Crowningshield, ain't it—Mister Howard Crowningshield?" Old Lead Pencil said.

"Yes, sir, that is my name."

"Wal, boss, my handle is Lead Pencil—Old Lead Pencil, the gang call me, 'cos selling lead-pencils is the leetle racket I work."

"I've come to see you on a mighty important little bit of business. I ain't fixed up like I was a-goin' to make an evening call, but I reckon you won't pay much attention to my clothes when you know wot I've got to say."

Crowningshield fixed his keen eyes upon the

face of the old man as intently as if to read him to the heart.

Old Lead Pencil bore the scrutiny without flinching.

For once in his life, at any rate, he had spoken the truth, and did not fear investigation.

"Follow me, please," Crowningshield said, after a moment's hesitation.

Then he led the way through the entry to a smoking-room, which was on the first floor at the rear of the house.

The gas was lit, and the evening papers were on the table.

Crowningshield had occupied the room when the tramp's ring summoned him to the door.

He had been anxiously awaiting the return of his boy, and when he heard the ring, he imagined that it was his little Goldenlocks.

As the two passed through the entry, the servant, whose business it was to attend to the door, began to ascend the stairs from the basement.

"You need not come up, James," warned Crowningshield, and then after he conducted his visitor into the smoking-room, he carefully closed the door.

"Sit down," the young man continued, motioning the old fellow to a seat. "You can speak freely here, and without danger of being overheard."

There was something about the man that suggested to Crowningshield that he would not freely unfold his business if he thought there was any danger of any one overhearing his words.

"I'm goin' to speak 'bout a rayther delicate subject," began the old tramp, "an' it goes back to a pint in your life 'bout nine years ago."

A look of amazement appeared upon the face of the young man, for this was entirely unexpected.

"Nine years ago?" he said in a tone of question.

"Yas, that is what I sed. Mebbe you'll wonder how I came to know anything 'bout the matter, but that is neither here nor there. I come by my knowledge honestly enough, an', as long as I give yer the information you want, I s'pose you don't keer 'bout pokin' yer nose into how I got hold on it."

"I have no wish to pry into your secrets."

"Wal, it's 'bout yer wife that scooted away from yer nine years ago!" Old Lead Pencil exclaimed, abruptly.

Crowningshield grew a trifle paler, and drew a long breath. He was in a measure prepared for this revelation by what the old man had previously said.

"I was arter her on a leetle matter of business jest about that time, an' she gi'n me the slip too."

A strange expression passed over Crowningshield's face as he listened to these words, and the thought immediately came into his mind:

"What possible connection could there be between his young, innocent girl-wife and this weather-beaten old tramp?"

But he did not put the thought into words and so after a brief pause Old Lead Pencil continued:

"It was jest by accident I found out that she had got married to you since I had seen her, an' when I diskivered next day that she had skipped, I reckoned you would be apt to feel mighty bad about it."

"I've been on the lookout for her ever since, an' I suppose you have too?"

Crowningshield nodded.

"Wal, I run across the critter yesterday jest by accident, you know, 'cos I hadn't the least idee that she would ever come back to Bostin, arter scootin' out of it, the way she did."

"Jest for greens, you know, arter I found out that she had come back I went to work for to find out all about her, an' I did it right up to the handle, an' then I jest meditated a bit 'bout it an' I come to the conclusion that mebbe the information would be wuth somethin' to you an' so I thought I had better see you."

"It was a mean thing for the gal to run away from you an' her little babby, arter all you did for her too, for I reckoned she must have been mighty down on her luck when you picked her up."

These words so confidently spoken sent a flood of horrible suspicions tearing through the brain of Crowningshield.

What dark mystery was there in connection with the life of the beautiful young girl he had wedded before he encountered her?

True there might be some mistake in the matter; the woman to whom this miserable old wretch referred so confidently might not be the girl who had dealt him such a terrible blow in the long ago.

Yet his knowledge of the matter seemed to be complete.

If the woman of whom he spoke was not the Roxanna whom he had loved and lost, how did it happen that he was acquainted with all the particulars of the affair?

To not a soul in the world with the exception of his uncle and his two chums had he breathed a word in regard to the departure of his wife, so he mentally said, and then the next instant the remembrance flashed across his

memory that the particulars of the affair had been confided to the chief of police at the time when his efforts had been invoked.

The chief himself counseled that the matter should be kept strictly private, and had said he would put men on the case who could be depended upon not to "give it away."

The secret might have leaked out in that direction, and this old fellow's object might be to obtain money by professing to be master of information which really he did not possess.

Acting upon this idea he spoke.

"Naturally I am anxious to unravel the mystery which has cast a shadow over my life, and if you can put me in possession of any information in regard to the whereabouts of my wife who so strangely disappeared nine years ago, I shall be glad to pay you liberally for your trouble."

"In course, guv'nor, I don't want for to go for to pretend that I am above makin' a stake out of this 'ere thing," Old Lead Pencil admitted, honestly. "Cos that's the leetle game that I'm up too, every time, an' don't you forget it."

"But I'm actin' on the squar' with you—I wish I may die if I ain't. I kin tell you where your wife is—I kin fix it so that if you like you kin stand face to face with her inside of a half-an-hour—an' I ain't a-givin' you any ghost story either when I say it."

"I may as well own up too, that I'm arter a leetle bit of revenge in this matter. I've got a grudge to settle."

"She played me a nasty trick when she cut her stick without takin' the trouble for to say good-by to any one, an' I'm a-tryin' for to git squar' with her now by tryin' the swap away to you, for of all the men that there are in this world, you are about the last one that she wants for to see."

"She hates the sight of me bad enough, but then I'm only a poor, miserable, old, played-out wretch, an' she is rich and powerful enuff for to laugh at me, but when you get in on her track, I reckon she won't do much laughing," and the old fellow chuckled at the idea.

"I am willing to pay you liberally for any information as I have said, but, to speak plainly, I do not desire to be tricked in the matter," Crowningshield remarked.

Old Lead Pencil laughed at the idea. It was nothing new to him to have his word doubted. In fact he thought it was a compliment to his ability.

"Oh, I'm playin' a squar' game this time!" he asserted. "You needn't pay me a cent until you have met the woman an' satisfied yerself that it is all correct. Yer a gentleman an' I'm willing to trust yer, but, guv'nor, I wants for to strike you for 'bout a hundred dollars. Wot do yer say? Is it a go?"

CHAPTER XIV.

A CLEW.

CROWNINGSHIELD surveyed his visitor for a moment with a searching glance, but the old fellow never flinched and the young man became satisfied that no matter how great a rascal he was generally, on this occasion he could be depended upon.

"It is a bargain," Crowningshield said. "I agree to the conditions."

"Give me a clew so that I can come face to face with the woman who fled from me nine years ago and I will gladly pay you the sum you ask."

"One hundred dollars!" exclaimed Old Lead Pencil eagerly, as if he was afraid that there might be some mistake about the matter.

The prompt acceptance of his offer surprised him. He had asked a hundred with the idea of getting fifty, and now that his own figure had been accepted he was angry with himself at having been such a fool as to set so low a value upon the information.

"I might just as well struck him for two or three hundred while I war 'bout it," he thought. "I would have got it jest as quick. Wot's money to these big bugs who are jest rolling in riches?"

"Yes, one hundred dollars."

Just at this moment there came a tap at the door, Crowningshield bade the applicant enter and one of the servants made his appearance with a letter.

"I found this, sir, shoved under the front door. It's addressed to you, sir."

Crowningshield took the letter which bore his name upon it in printed characters, instead of written ones.

The servant directly retired.

"Excuse me," the young man said, as he opened the letter, to the tramp, as polite to the old wretch as though he had been a millionaire.

Old Lead Pencil ducked his head.

The letter contained the page torn from the memorandum book, upon which little Goldenlocks had written his message to his father.

"I've gone to see mamma and will be back soon."

Slowly the father read the lines, but not aloud so as to reach the listening ears of the old tramp. Here was more mystery.

And after a moment's reflection Crowningshield determined to make known the contents of the note to his visitor.

"It is from my boy," he said. "My little Adonis. I have been expecting him home ever since the darkness came, and when you rung I thought it was my lad, and when I discovered that it wasn't I supposed he had gone to some neighbor's house with one of his playmates, although I never knew him to stay away from home without permission."

"He writes, 'I've gone to see mamma and will be back soon.'"

Old Lead Pencil stared in amazement.

Here was a move in the game which was entirely unexpected and the suddenness of the surprise staggered him for a moment.

But when he came to reflect upon the matter he thought he understood it.

Roxanna had seen her child and recognized him when she rode by in her carriage, but was politic enough to conceal the fact.

Then she had contrived to get rid of the judge and had returned, found the boy on the common, and persuaded him to go with her.

It was a neat scheme and had been splendidly worked, yet why she should reveal to the boy that she was his mother and then permit him to write a note which would be certain to bring Crowningshield upon her track was a mystery which was beyond the old tramp's power to fathom.

"It's too much for me, I give it up," he murmured to himself, and then he said aloud:

"Wal, I kin tell yer where she is an' then you kin find yer boy too."

"She lives in Commonwealth avenue, and is known now as Mrs. Judge Jefferson Jones."

"Indeed?" and a look of astonishment swept rapidly over Crowningshield's face.

The intelligence astounded the young man; the idea that the girl whom he had cherished and loved as few women are loved in this world had coolly deserted him for another was terrible.

"You are sure that you hav'n't made any mistake in this matter?" he asked in bewilderment for he could not bring himself to believe that it was possible.

By reputation he well knew the great copper king, as the judge was sometimes termed; and in the circle in which Crowningshield moved Judge Jefferson Jones was not looked upon with favor.

Since his advent in Boston he had striven with all his might to gain access to the charmed circle composed of the old aristocracy of our modern Athens. But these exclusive beings would have nothing to do with the millionaire from the howling wilderness adjacent to the shores of Lake Superior.

Boston culture and blue blood would have nothing to do with the coarse-grained, clodhopper copper man.

He might be a great being in Marquette and Escanaba, but Boston would have none of him. And the idea that this bull-headed brute of a man had possession of the woman whom he had loved so well and lost so strangely was galling in the extreme to the proud, sensitive Howard Crowningshield.

"Nary bit of mistake!" cried Old Lead Pencil, firmly. "Ain't I risking a hundred 'cases' on it? How better kin a man back his words than with the solid old stuff?"

"It can't be did," the tramp continued.

"Give me a keerd an' I'll write the address for you, an' I'll sign my name to the document so that my lady will know that the blow comes from me."

The card was given him and upon it Old Lead Pencil scribbled the address of Mrs. Judge Jefferson Jones.

"This it is, right as nincence!" he exclaimed with a grin of triumph as he handed the card to Crowningshield.

"Mind you, guv'nor, the chances are 'bout ten to one that she won't acknowledge the corn an' will try for to check it out that she hain't never seen you afore," Old Lead Pencil continued.

"That's the lay-out she give me an' when I wouldn't have it she told me right out and out that I was crazy an' threatened for to call her servants for to put me out."

All this seemed so inexplicable to Crowningshield that he was sorely puzzled.

Surely the gentle, though rather odd-acting girl whom he had married in defiance of what the world might think or say would never act in such a manner.

There surely must be some terrible mistake in the matter and the moment he came face to face with this Mrs. Judge Jefferson Jones he would discover what it was.

His suspicions though tended to the idea that it was a case of mistaken identity, and that when he encountered the lady he would discover she was a stranger to him.

But then his boy's letter stating that he had gone to see his mamma—

Altogether it was a most perplexing puzzle and he knew not what to think.

"I will call upon the lady immediately," he said, "for the quicker my doubts are solved the better."

"That's right, guv'nor, that's the way to talk!" exclaimed the old tramp and he rubbed his hands gleefully together, overjoyed at the thought of the vengeance which his hand was

about to hurl at the woman who had dared to defy him.

"An' when can I come in arter the ducats, guv'nor?" he continued.

"To-morrow morning, at nine o'clock."

"Couldn't advance me ten on account now, could you, guv'nor?" Old Lead Pencil asked, persuasively, a leering smile upon his ugly face.

"I could, but I will not," Crowningshield answered, quietly.

The old hummer's smile vanished, a regretful look taking its place, and he shook his head in a mournful way.

"Now, guv'nor, this is really too bad. I reckon you don't trust me."

"You are right, I do not; and I most decidedly object to paying any money until I have an opportunity to discover whether the information you have given me can be relied upon."

"Guv'nor, I wish I may die if it ain't the blessed truth!" Old Lead Pencil exclaimed in the most earnest way possible.

"I wouldn't strike you for the ten if I wasn't strapped in the worst kind of way, clean down to hard-pan, so to speak; durn me for a liar if I've got a copper for to pay for a night's lodgin', an' it's pretty hard lines on an old man like me for to have to walk the streets all night, or else to be forced to get a lay-out on the soft side of a hard plank in some station-house," and the wily tramp wrinkled his face up and tried hard to force out some tears from his bleared eyes as he made this pathetic appeal.

But the young man was no fool to be cajoled out of his money in any such fashion. He had seen whining beggars before, and knew exactly how much reliance could be placed upon any of their statements.

"You will not be forced to either of those alternatives," Crowningshield observed.

"You can have your money to-night—the whole sum, if you like."

"You don't mean it, guv'nor?" cried Old Lead Pencil, joyously, his face lighting up.

"Yes, I do. I will visit the lady immediately, and it is not probable that I will be detained after ten."

"So if you will come here at any time after that hour you can have your money."

The alacrity with which the old fellow jumped to this proposition seemed to Crowningshield to argue that whether his information was true or not, he thoroughly believed that it was.

"All right, guv'nor, that will do," responded the old man, rubbing his hands gleefully together, as was his custom when pleased with anything.

"That will do, bully!" he repeated. "And, guv'nor, you needn't to hurry yourself on my account, you know; I'm my own master, and my time ain't worth much anyhow."

"Eleven or twelve will suit me jest as well as ten, so don't hurry yourself, an' I'll be on hand."

With this assurance, Old Lead Pencil departed, chuckling gleefully at his good fortune at not only being able to be revenged upon the woman who had braved him, but at the luck which had enabled him to gain a hundred dollars by the operation.

After the tramp's departure, Crowningshield arrayed himself for the street, and within fifteen minutes he stood before the door of the elegant mansion wherein, in almost regal splendor, dwelt Mrs. Judge Jefferson Jones.

CHAPTER XV.

FACE TO FACE.

THE keen eyes of the young man noted all the surroundings and he murmured to himself as he laid his hand upon the bell-knob.

"If it is my Roxanna who dwells here, her liens have fallen in pleasant places, as far as worldly comfort goes."

And then as the peal of the tinkling bell within the mansion died away, his thoughts took another turn.

"Suppose it is my Roxanna?" he murmured, "suppose it is she, and that she has been as false and fickle as this old man's story makes her out to be; when she finds out who it is that wishes to see her will she not deny herself?"

"If it is Roxanna, surely she will never dare to face me—to face the man whom she has wronged so bitterly."

"And if she refuses to see me, what am I to do? I cannot force my way to her presence."

"No, not that would be impossible. If she takes the alarm and refuses me an audience, my only recourse will be to invoke the aid of the detectives and the law."

"But then, if she means to play any such game as that, why on earth did she attract the attention of the boy, for it is evident that she did do so, for it is hardly possible that the little fellow could have recognized her without she attracted his attention."

"Oh, what a dark mystery the whole matter is from beginning to end!"

The appearance of the colored servant put an end to Crowningshield's meditation.

"Is Mrs. Jones at home?" he inquired.

"Yes, sah."

"Please give her my card and say that I should like the pleasure of a few minutes' conversation with her."

"Yes, sah; it's Mrs. Jones, sah, you want?" asked the man, as if to make sure he had heard correctly.

"Yes, Mrs. Jones."

"Dat's all right, she's at home, but de judge is out—he's out of town, sah, on business and won't be home for two or free days."

"It is the lady that I wish to see."

"Yes, sah; hab de kindness, sah, to step into de parlor."

And the black with all possible politeness led the way into the gorgeously-furnished apartment.

The man was a first-class servant, understood his business thoroughly, and was seldom deceived in regard to a visitor.

He had perceived that Crowningshield ranked A No. 1, first chop, as he would have expressed it, and so treated him with due respect.

Placing an easy-chair for the visitor, he requested him to be seated, and then turned the gas lights in the chandelier up full, so that the parlor was illuminated by a flood of light.

This done, he departed to the upper regions of the house to warn his mistress.

"Now, then, when she sees my card, if she is my Roxanna will she dare to come and face me?" Crowningshield muttered as the servant disappeared.

He had not long to wait in regard to the solving of the question of whether the lady would see him or not, for in a very few minutes the servant returned.

"If you will have de kindness to wait, sah, for a few minutes, de Mrs. Jones will be down."

She would see him, then, but did she comprehend who he was?

"You gave the lady my card?"

"Yes, sah!" and then, with his best bow, the negro retired.

He had glanced at the name inscribed on the card as he went up-stairs, and being an old Bostonian, had quickly recognized it as belonging to one of the Beacon Hill aristocracy.

"Dem Crowningshields are one of dem ole-fashioned kind," he had commented, as he proceeded to his quarters in the lower part of the house.

"None of yer shoddy biz 'bout dem, you kin bet yer boots," he remarked, as he went down the stairs.

The suspense of the few moments that intervened between the departure of the servant and the moment when to the listening ears of Crowningshield there came the sound of the light rustle of a woman's dress, as the mistress of the mansion descended from the upper region, was almost unbearable to the waiting man.

She came lightly down the stairs, clad in a superb costume, designed by no less an artist than the famous man-milliner of Paris.

Diamonds, costly enough to buy the ransom of a king, sparkled in her ears, a brooch of the same precious stones sparkled upon her bosom, and a pair of exquisitely beautiful bracelets, richly adorned, too, with diamonds, clasped her slender wrists.

Beautiful as an angel looked she thus elegantly dressed, and it needed only one glance at her face to convince Howard Crowningshield that Old Lead Pencil had not deceived him, and had fairly earned his hundred dollars.

He rose to his feet to meet her, his heart beating high with excitement, every pulse within his form quivering, and yet outwardly he appeared perfectly calm, his face betraying no more sign of any emotion than if it had been the face of a marble statue, with the exception that his eyes appeared unusually bright, and there was a peculiar expression visible within them.

The woman looked almost the same; she had not seemed to have aged a particle during the nine years which had elapsed since Crowningshield last looked upon her face.

It was the fair young girl, Roxanna Merivale, whom he had so recklessly married, without taking the trouble to ascertain anything about her, believing fully and implicitly the story she told.

There was not the least doubt about it, and yet she came into the room and looked at him in an inquiring manner, as though he was a perfect stranger.

The look sent a cold chill to the heart of Crowningshield, and acting on the impulse of the moment, he extended his hands and cried, in a voice which trembled with emotion:

"Roxanna, is it possible that you do not remember me?"

The lady halted abruptly; a look of astonishment appeared upon her features, slightly mingled with alarm.

"I beg your pardon, sir, but what did you say?" she asked.

Then the remembrance of what Old Lead Pencil had said came back to the mind of Crowningshield.

She was about to try on him the same game which had so discomfited the hummer.

It was her intent to pretend that she was not the person he took her to be, and that she had never seen him before.

The truth was plain, and the young man was too sensible to attempt to ignore it.

The woman whom he had loved, whom he had picked out of the gutter, as it were, and for

whom he had risked all his worldly prospects, was about to repay him by asserting that she knew him not.

It was a terrible blow to fall upon him after all these years of patient watchfulness and untiring search.

"I asked you if it was possible that you have forgotten me?" he said, his voice steady and strong, without the least sign of emotion.

The lady hesitated before she answered, her brows contracted as though she was in deep thought.

"Sir," she said at last, "I perceive you are laboring under a misapprehension which, possibly, I may have difficulty in removing.

"You are the second person who has addressed me by a name which does not belong to me, and I presume I am not far from the truth in my suspicion that to the information furnished you by the wretched old man who intruded upon me this evening, I am indebted for this visit."

"Yes, that is correct," Crowningshield replied.

"He was very angry when he found that I would not admit I was the person whom he took me to be, and went away vowing vengeance, and he threatened, too, to send some one here who would be certain to give me a great deal of trouble. I presume, sir, that you are the person," and she looked Crowningshield straight in the eye as she finished the sentence, and there was a slight air of defiance plainly perceptible.

"Madam, I do not come to you in any such mood as your words indicate, nor am I a man likely to act as the tool of another.

"I do come, though, to demand an explanation—it is my due—I am fully entitled to it, and I must have it.

"It is useless for you to attempt to deceive me, nor can you hope to gain anything by following such a course.

"I know that you are the woman who, some ten years ago, called herself Roxanna Merivale. You are the woman whom I married—the woman who fled from me, deserting both husband and child without a word of explanation.

"I have sought for you, without tiring, ever since, for I had faith enough in you to believe that you could not be guilty of such a crime without being compelled to the act by circumstances over which you had no control.

"I surmised that there was some dark mystery connected with your life before the period when you and I came together, for such a thing alone could explain or excuse your conduct."

The lady had listened to the speech with a face utterly devoid of expression, but when Crowningshield had finished she shook her head, as much as to say that she despaired of attempting to argue with a man so set in his opinion.

"I perceive that the task before me is a more difficult one than I had anticipated," she said, after pausing for a moment as if to collect her thoughts.

"Have the kindness to be seated, please," and she motioned him to a chair.

"The explanation which you have forced upon me will be a long one and I trust you will give me a patient hearing."

"Certainly, madam," Crowningshield replied as he seated himself, a look of inflexible determination shining in his eyes.

"It is my earnest hope that you may be able to explain this matter and justify the act which seemingly cannot be justified."

"Listen to the story which I have to tell and then you can form your own conclusions. I shall not attempt to conceal anything from you; the plain, unvarnished truth alone, will I relate.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE STORY OF ROXANNA.

CROWNINGSHIELD simply bowed his head and then the lady began.

"I am going to tell you a very strange story, sir—a story which is more like a romance than reality. The heroine of the story has been near and dear to me, yet I shall not on that account attempt to find excuse for her conduct.

"I will merely raise the veil from the mystery that now enshrouds Roxanna Merivale. I will allow you to sit in judgment upon her, but I shall take pains to fully explain to you the motives which impelled her to take the course she did."

"Excuse me, madam!" exclaimed Crowningshield as she paused at this point.

"Do I understand that you begin by asserting that you are not Roxanna Merivale?"

"Most certainly!" she replied, immediately.

"But the assertion is a useless one, for I know that you are she."

She made an impatient gesture, as though to beg him to keep silent.

"Wait until you hear what I have to say before you decide so positively upon that point.

"I presume you are aware that there has been plenty of instances in this world where two people have looked so much alike that it has been impossible for their dearest friends and nearest relatives to tell them apart?"

"Oh, yes, I have personal knowledge of something of the kind. When I was a boy at school two of my playmates, twin brothers, were so ex-

actly alike that no one was able to distinguish one from the other."

"In that case then, you should be willing to accept as truth, the story I am about to tell.

"In the first place allow me to say that the recital is an extremely painful one to me, and that if I did not recognize that you had a right to know the truth, no power in this world would induce me to betray the secret that has so long been hidden from every one but myself."

"If any one in existence has the right to know the story of Roxanna Merivale, I think it is myself," Crowningshield remarked.

"I admit that right, and therefore I speak. Luckily all of the story is known to me, and so I can lay bare to you the secret springs which are at the bottom of this mysterious affair.

"That I bear a striking resemblance to Roxanna Merivale is not wonderful; I am her twin sister. My name, before I married Judge Jones, was Roselle Merivale.

"My sister and myself were born in Maine, but when we were twelve years old my father decided to try his fortunes in the Far West, and we moved to Kansas.

"Our mother was one of the best women that the Creator ever put on earth, but our father was one of those unfortunate men who are of no good to any one.

"He was a man with a good trade, but he would not work if he could possibly avoid it; then, too, he was dissipated, and when he did work, squandered his money as fast as he got it.

"For the sake of us two children, mother bore with him, and did everything in her power to bring us up in the right way.

"Father became worse and worse though, and soon became notorious as being one of the greatest scamps in the town; and then at last, when we were sixteen years old, there came a blow which broke our mother's heart, and hurried her into an untimely grave.

"In a drunken quarrel in one of the low drinking-saloons of the town, father used a knife upon one of his companions, and although I am sure he did not really mean to seriously harm the man, for he never had any more heart than a hare, yet the wounded man died, and my father was dragged out by the infuriated crowd and lynched upon the spot.

"When the news reached my mother, the shock almost killed her.

"As soon as she rallied sufficiently, she hastened forth to gain assistance, so that the remains might be given decent burial; but even this poor consolation was denied her, for the avengers who had in so summary a manner put my unfortunate father to death, afraid, apparently, that the authorities might take it into their heads to look into the matter, with the idea of punishing the men who had so wantonly taken the law into their hands, carried away and secreted the body, and so thoroughly was the work performed, that no traces of it was ever discovered.

"Mother only survived this tragedy a few months, and then when she had gone to her long rest, we found shelter with a lady who carried on the dressmaking business, and who took us to learn the trade.

"But the lady and Roxanna did not agree very well together. Roxanna was a strange girl, with some very odd ideas. She hated work, and the slavery of the needle was something she could not endure.

"Like the caged bird she panted to escape, and she took advantage of the first opportunity that offered. By chance she made the acquaintance of a young man, a stranger who came to the little village where we resided. He was a handsome fellow, dressed elegantly, and said he was a man of wealth from the East, traveling for pleasure.

"Roxanna and he fell in love with each other at the first glance, and although there wasn't any one to interfere in the matter they determined to elope and did so, Roxanna leaving behind a letter saying that she had gone to St. Louis to be married to the man of her choice.

"All the village gossips shook their heads when they heard of the elopement and predicted that no good would come of it, but that was to be expected of course, for few in the village had a good word for the daughters of drunken Solomon Merivale, who had dipped his hands in the blood of a fellow-man and then been hung by an infuriated mob.

"But they were both wrong and right.

"The man whom Roxanna trusted kept his word and when St. Louis was reached they were married, but he had deceived her in regard to his real station in life.

"He was not a gentleman of fortune with money enough to make him independent of the world; on the contrary, he was an adventurer, a gambler, who depended upon the shrewdness of his wits and the quickness of his hands for a living.

"But for all that Roxanna was perfectly happy and contented. At heart she was a Bohemian—a vagabond and this wild life suited her exactly, and in time she became so used to it that she aided her husband in his raids on the purses of the rich young flats whom he so skillfully picked up."

The lady paused for a moment and a long,

hard-drawn breath escaped from between Crowningshield's lips.

The revelation astounded him, for the blow had descended upon him as suddenly and with as little warning as the lightning's flash when it breaks through an unclouded sky.

The idea was gall and wormwood to him that his Roxanna—the pure and spotless maiden, as he had so firmly believed—the girl whom he had loved so well that for her sake he had put in peril all his worldly prospects—had been the wife and willing accomplice of a miserable wretch of a gambler who managed to secure a precarious living by fleecing unsuspecting fools with more money than brains.

He would not have been willing to give the tale credence had there not been something in the woman's manner which convinced him that she was telling the truth.

His idol had been rudely shattered and by merciless hands.

From St. Louis the pair went to Chicago and then to Boston and there their life-path glided into the shadows which so often darken the gambler's life," the woman continued.

"In Boston Roxanna played the siren's part as she had done in the West, but on one fatal night three rich young men were enticed into the trap; they were treated with liquor, but for all that they had sense enough to see that they were being fleeced and that Roxanna's husband was not winning their money fairly.

"The gambler had not thrived since coming to Boston; his money had run out and impelled by his urgent want of funds he was making a desperate effort to secure a rich stake.

"The young men accused him of cheating, and a quarrel arose, weapons were drawn, the gambler was forced to draw his in self-defense, for his foes were upon him, swearing that they would have his heart's blood.

"There was an exchange of shots. One of the young men was badly wounded, and Roxanna's gambler husband shot right through the temple, was killed on the instant.

"His death though was quickly avenged by Roxanna.

"She always carried a small revolver, and had been taught by her husband how to use it.

"The moment she saw the effect of the death-dealing shot—saw the blood gush forth from the little round hole in the forehead, through which the leaden ball had penetrated to the brain, in a transport of rage, she drew her weapon and without mercy, shot down the other two young men. How badly they were wounded, she knew not, but she had fired to kill."

CHAPTER XVII.

HOW SHE ESCAPED.

COLDLY and mechanically she had related the story; any one listening to her recital without being aware that she was the heroine of the tale, would never have suspected from her manner, that she had ought to do with it.

It was as if she had merely recited some tale of fiction in which she took but little interest, and which she was anxious to finish as soon as possible.

The effect of this disclosure was to turn Crowningshield seemingly into a man of stone. He sat motionless and gazed with dilated eyes upon the woman as she rehearsed the story.

Mentally the question flashed across his mind:

"Can it be possible that I have heard aright? Have not my senses deceived me, and is not this tale all the trick of a fervid imagination? Can it be reality?"

A momentary pause, and then she again proceeded:

"When the deed of vengeance was accomplished, the sound of footsteps and of voices in the hall without, warned her that the neighbors were aroused, and if she did not wish to be dragged into a police court, she must make her escape without delay.

"So she passed into the rear room, caught up her hat and cloak, and by a back staircase gained the street.

"She was not troubled by the thought that she was forced to fly without taking her valuables with her, for about all she had in the world, was upon her person.

"One by one she had parted with everything of value that she possessed, raising money on them at the pawn-shops, so that they could live.

"Once in the street, she hurried away from the ill-fated house where the tragedy had occurred, as rapidly as possible. She did not stop to think in regard to the direction in which she should go; all she desired was to get so far away, that there wouldn't be any danger of her being apprehended by the police.

"She hurried on, and at last found herself on the Cambridge bridge.

"The cool breeze from the water felt grateful to her feverish brow, and she walked out on the bridge.

"And now that she had time for reflection, she began to consider what was best for her to do. She was literally penniless; not a single coin of any description did she possess, and the only article upon which she could stand any chance of raising money at the pawnbroker's, was the well-worn coat which shielded her form.

"But then, if she deprived herself of her coat, how could she possibly get along without it?"

"She halted by the draw of the bridge, and gazing down at the swiftly-flowing waters, meditated upon this perplexing problem.

"Do not think for a moment that she had any idea of committing suicide, for it was not so; she was too much in love with life to ever dream of sacrificing it.

"The night was clear, and the moon riding at her full in the sky made everything almost as light as by day.

"As she gazed upon the dark waters, wondering how she could possibly obtain money to sustain life, the sound of distant footfalls fell upon her ears.

"Some one—a man evidently by the sound—was coming over the bridge from Cambridge.

"An idea instantly flashed into her brain. She had used her womanly arts to entrap pigeons into the net so cunningly spread by her husband so they might be plucked, why not employ them now when it was a question almost of life and death?

"No sooner did the idea occur to her than she was prompt to execute it.

"She clambered over the railing and descended to the pier, which just jutted out into the water, and upon which the draw-bridge worked.

"It was her idea that the gentleman who was approaching would be attracted by the action so that he would stop to ascertain what she meant to do.

"The ruse succeeded, the gentleman's attention was attracted—he followed her onto the pier and arrived just in time, as he thought, to prevent her from throwing herself into the river.

"That gentleman was yourself, and you know what followed.

"She fascinated you—you protected her, and finally she became your wife, deceiving you with a false story of her early life.

"She was tired of the life she had led, and fancied that in a more quiet existence she could find peace and rest.

"But she was deceived; the quiet, humdrum life was as irksome to her as the prison-bars of the cage to the confined bird. And then, too, she did not love you in the least; she respected you, for she could not help doing that; she ought to have been grateful to you for you were very good to her, but in her nature there was no such thing as gratitude. She did not know the meaning of the word as far as she, personally, was concerned.

"But, possibly, she would have forced herself to be contented with her lot had not this miserable old wretch, who calls himself Old Lead Pencil, happened to discover her.

"He was one of the residents of the Kansas village where her father had met so terrible a fate; he had discovered all the particulars in regard to her marriage with you, and threatened unless a certain yearly sum was paid to him as hush-money, to go to your relatives and tell the shameful story.

"This was the last straw that broke the camel's back.

"Life with you was distasteful to her, for the only man she ever loved was in his grave, and it was agony to her to be obliged to submit to your caresses; but to endure them, and be at the same time a slave to this wretched old man, obliged to purchase his silence, was too much for her to bear.

"And so she fled.

"She came West and hunted me up. I was in Chicago at the time.

"Judge Jones had made my acquaintance, we were engaged to be married, and were there preparing for the ceremony.

"Roxanna told me her story frankly, not attempting to defend her conduct in the least, and I have as frankly told it to you.

"I explained as much of the matter as was necessary to the judge, and asked his advice.

"He counseled that Roxanna should procure a divorce, for, as she was determined not to live with you, it would be as well to have the tie loosened as soon as possible.

"Under the lax laws of Illinois, such matters are easily arranged. We all thought that it was best the divorce should be obtained without your knowledge, so that you could not contest it.

"The divorce was granted, and ten hours afterward, Roxanna Merivale was a dead woman. Heart disease, the doctor said.

"My first idea was to write to you about the matter, but then on second thoughts, I concluded not to. Roxanna was dead, and why should I mix myself up in the affair, since there was no good end to be served.

"This miserable wretch, this Old Lead Pencil, attempted to blackmail me, but he soon discovered that I am made of sterner stuff than my unfortunate sister, and then too, I am differently situated," and the proud lip of the lady curled in contempt as she spoke.

"I have no secrets from my husband, the judge, and never have had from the first. He knew all about my unfortunate father before he married me, and consequently, when he threatened to go to my husband and reveal to him the dreadful secret which clouded all of my young life, I simply laughed at him, and you can judge

of the anger the miserable wretch experienced when I told him he could not tell my husband anything about me, that he did not already know.

"Then, when he threatened to go to some of the newspapers and get them to publish the scandal—there are some disgraceful journals, you know, always glad to get hold of such things—I dared him to do it and brave the anger of my husband.

"Judge Jefferson Jones, as of course you are aware, is a man of both wealth and influence, and would think no more of crushing this miserable wretch beneath his heel, than if he were one of the noxious vermin which he so much resembles.

"This contemptible creature did not dare to rouse the anger of my husband, but being eager to wreak his spite upon him, sought you out and told you that I was Roxanna, knowing that my resemblance to my twin sister was so great, that you would surely be deceived into the belief that I was the woman you sought.

"You will see, Mr. Crowningshield, that I have spoken frankly, have not kept anything back, nor attempted to defend my sister's conduct in the least.

"I thought you were entitled to a frank and full explanation, and I have done my best to make everything plain to you.

"The action that my sister took in running away from you and her child, was unaccountable to me, and when I remonstrated with her, saying that the best way to deal with such miserable reptiles as Old Lead Pencil, was to defy them from the beginning, all she would reply, was:

"I could not live with that man. His goodness and his generosity made life a perfect hell to me, and I would rather die than live the existence of deception I was leading.

"He and I did not agree in the least, although there never was the slightest outward sign of such a thing on my part; but his caresses were hateful to me—I could not bear them—although he was everything, both as lover and husband, that a woman could ask.

"I endured the chain until it became so oppressive that it seemed to be crushing the very life out of me, and then I burst my bonds and fled."

"Now, sir, you are in possession of all the facts, and my story is ended."

For fully a minute there was silence.

Crowningshield sat as still as though he had been transformed to stone, his eyes fixed with an earnest gaze upon the face of the lady, studying it as intently as if he expected to discover from it whether the strange tale which she told was true or not.

But if he had any such idea he was doomed to be disappointed, for the beautiful face was as a mask which completely concealed her thoughts.

At last Crowningshield spoke:

"You will, I trust, excuse me, madam, if I act like a prudent man of the world, and ask you if you have proof of the truth of this story."

The lady inclined her head graciously.

"Certainly; the doubt is a reasonable one," she said, not betraying the least vexation at his unbelieving question.

"The proofs are all in Chicago, and I can give you directions so you can easily get at them."

"What are these proofs?"

"The notice of the death and burial of Roxanna Merivale, as printed in the Chicago newspapers. The record kept at the cemetery where she was interred, showing that at a certain time the mortal remains of such a woman were committed to Mother Earth. The testimony of the doctor who attended her during her brief illness—I can give you his name, but you may not be able to find him, for you must remember that nearly ten years have elapsed, and the man may be dead, for all I know. If he is alive, though, it will not be a difficult matter, for he was no obscure common practitioner, but one of the leading men of the city. The judge did not spare money in doing all he could for my unfortunate sister."

Crowningshield took out his memorandum-book, opened it, and with his pencil prepared to write.

There was a peculiar gleam in the eyes of the lady as she noted the preparations.

It was a question whether it denoted triumph or simply satisfaction.

"You desire the name of the doctor, the cemetery, and date, I presume?" she said.

"Not at present, thank you; but have the kindness to oblige me with the name of the village in Kansas where you lived and where your father died such a miserable death," he answered.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A DECLARATION OF WAR.

AND now again a long pause ensued.

The lady gazed at Crowningshield with fixed intensity, and there was a baleful light in her eyes, and it was so apparent that even a less careful observer than the man who had devoted his life to tracking the woman who had proved so false to him could not have helped observing it.

The woman was taken completely by surprise by the unexpected demand and it required some time for her to collect her thoughts.

Why did he wish to know the name of the Kansas village—of what interest was that to him?

At length she spoke.

"Did I understand you rightly?" she questioned. "Do you desire to know the name of the village in Kansas where my father met his fate in so fearful a manner?"

"Yes, that is the information that I desire."

"But why do you wish to know anything about the matter—of what possible interest is it to you?"

She put the question as earnestly as though she was in good truth puzzled by the circumstance, but in reality she fancied she had guessed his purpose and a wild, mad rage was swelling in her heart.

"Madam, you have been very frank with me in this matter," Crowningshield replied immediately, "and I desire to be equally so with you. It is my firm belief that you have told me the true story of Roxanna Merivale, and I can easily comprehend why she should fly from me and her child feeling as she did, for I can readily understand how terrible it must be for a woman to be bound to a man whom she does not love—I ought to put it even stronger than that—whom she really despises, because he has been fool enough to be captivated by her fair face and is so weak as to believe that the woman he loves would not deceive him with a lie.

"It explains the mystery which has puzzled me for so many years.

"I loved Roxanna Merivale as well as ever any man in this world loved woman, and through all this long lapse of time I have cherished the hope that one day she would return to me and her bright beautiful boy and happiness would once again descend upon my roof-tree.

"The dream is over now, your words have taken the life of the love as surely as the woodman's ax does the life of the tree when the keen blade cuts through the heart and the leafy monarch topples over to his doom.

"I believe every word you have told me about Roxanna Merivale's early life, and why she tricked me so completely on the night when we first encountered each other; I believe you have told me truly why she left me—why she abandoned the husband who would have periled life to save her from the slightest possible harm, and the child for whom she ought to have been willing to shed her heart's blood drop by drop.

"The mother brute will fight for her young to the last gasp—she knows no fear when her offspring are in danger; it is only the human mother that sinks below the level of the beasts and deserts the helpless one whom she ought to protect even at the risk of life."

A faint curl of the lady's lip was visible as she listened to the impassioned words and a hard, defiant look came into her eyes.

"I am satisfied that all of your story is true excepting the end.

"Roxanna Merivale is not dead—she is living and you are she!"

"The idea is absurd!" cried the lady in contempt, but for all of the scorn which she attempted to throw into her features there was an anxious expression there.

"The tale of the twin sisters is cunningly contrived to throw me from the truth. I have hunted you down at last and you are foolish enough to think with this specious tale you can make me believe that you are not the woman I take you to be.

"I don't care to examine the Chicago proofs of which you speak. I can understand how such a trick could be worked without any trouble provided plenty of money was furnished to carry the scheme through.

"In so big a city it would be an easy matter to find a dying girl, a blonde who would answer near enough the description of Roxanna Merivale; some poor soul without friends or money to aid her.

"The doctor might either be bribed or deceived, into the belief that she was Roxanna Merivale, then the rest follows as a matter of course.

"I am not anxious to probe the matter for I know a nearer way of getting at the truth.

"Give me the name of the Kansas village where you resided and where your father perished.

"I can quickly ascertain from the residents there whether Solomon Merivale had one daughter or two, and if there were two, whether they were twins or not—twins looking so exactly alike that they could not be told apart.

"If that is true then I will be able to believe that I have been deceived by one of the most marvelous resemblances that this world ever saw.

"If it is not, if I discover that Solomon Merivale did not have twin daughters named Roselle and Roxanna, then I will know that you are the woman I seek and that your tale in regard to the death is a falsehood.

"Therefore oblige me with the name of the village."

The lady rose slowly to her feet, her orbs blazing with baleful fires, hard ugly lines plainly visible around her eyes and mouth, while her face became deadly pale.

"You forget yourself, sir!" she exclaimed, her naturally sweet voice hoarse with suppressed passion.

"You insult me in my own house by expressing such doubts!"

"And what have you done to me?" Crowningshield questioned, also rising to his feet and towering over her with an expression upon his face such as a judge might assume while arraigning a convicted criminal.

"Destroyed all my life—took my honest love, which should have been the crown of some woman's life as a plaything to be trampled beneath your feet at your own sweet will, and now that at last I am face to face with you, instead of falling upon your knees and begging for mercy from the man you have so fearfully wronged, you attempt to carry matters with a high hand."

"Madam, while I loved you I was as a child whom you might at your will do with as you pleased, but now that I have discovered how unworthy you are of the love of any honest man, I am transformed into an avenger, for it is not the will of heaven that a woman so wicked as you have proved yourself to be should escape unwhipped of justice."

"Tell me the name of the town if you dare!" An expression of utter scorn appeared on the face of the lady.

"I laugh at your threats!" she cried. "I cannot tell you the name of the place for I have forgotten it. All the memories connected with it are unpleasant and I have blotted the record from my mind."

"Oh, that is a very likely story!" he exclaimed, contemptuously.

"No, no, that tale will not pass current. The idea that such a woman as you should ever be able to forget the name of the village where you passed your early life is absolutely ridiculous. But I can easily discover what I wish to know even if you refuse to give me the information."

"Old Lead Pencil will only be too glad to sell me the name of the town!"

The lady recoiled a step although she had been suddenly stricken in the face.

"You will seek the assistance of that miserable old wretch?" she cried.

"Most assuredly, for I am determined to sift this matter to the very bottom and if you are the vile creature that your own words have made you out to be I am determined that you shall not escape the punishment which should follow upon wicked deeds."

"Oh, he'll give you the information—he'll tell you all you want to know!" she cried in scorn, "and perhaps he will also tell you—but no; he will not dare to speak of that. Fears for his own safety will seal his lips."

"But do your worst; whether I am Roxanna Merivale or not I defy you."

"It does not matter what I have been or how I have been called. My name now is Roselle, and I am the wife of Judge Jefferson Jones who is able to and will protect me from all attacks," she fairly screamed, so excited had she become.

"If the judge is above the law he may be able to shield you, but if he is not, then, most assuredly, you will be punished."

"I will see him to-morrow, before I take any steps in the matter, and ascertain what he thinks about the subject."

By this time the lady had recovered her composure and surveyed him with a mocking smile.

"I can tell you beforehand that you will only have your labor for your pains, but since you wish war I will not attempt to dissuade you from it; but look to yourself, sir, for I warn you I will not submit tamely to this wanton attack."

"Threats ill-become you after what has passed," Crowningshield replied.

"But now, what have you done with my boy?"

"Your boy?" and the look of astonishment upon her face seemed genuine.

"Yes, is he not here with you? He did not return home to supper and just before I came here I received this note from him."

He produced the note which Little Goldenlocks had written and handed it to her.

She glanced over it.

"I do not suppose you will believe me," she said as she returned the note, "but I assure you I have not seen your child and know absolutely nothing whatever about him."

Crowningshield did not believe her.

"I give you until to-morrow morning to return the child," he said. "I will allow him to remain with you one night in order to see if there be any trace of the mother still existing in you. But if you do not return him to-morrow, I will call upon the aid of the police."

And with this threat he departed.

CHAPTER XIX.

PREPARING FOR THE ATTACK.

A SAD heart Howard Crowningshield carried in his bosom as he descended the steps of Judge Jones's princely mansion.

The woman for whom he had searched so long was found but under the circumstances

he asked himself if it would not have been better for him to have remained in ignorance of her fate than to make the dreadful discovery which had given him so great a shock.

In his mind there was not the least doubt that he had been face to face with Roxanna Merivale the woman whom he had once loved so well, and he fancied he understood her game too.

She had told him the truth in regard to why she left him; she had ruthlessly applied the knife to the roots of the tree of love, thinking that the tale she told would so disgust him that he would never want to see her face again.

It was a dreadful blow to the young man's pride. The idea that he had been the prey of a worthless adventuress, who had ruthlessly traded upon his affection so that she might sustain her worthless life was galling in the extreme.

But why did she wish to see her child if she was the vile creature which her tale if true proved her to be?

This was a puzzle which occupied Crowningshield's mind all the way home.

He could only account for it on the supposition that somewhere in the creature's nature there was a latent spark of womanhood which impelled her to wish to look upon her child, who had been absent from her for so many years.

"She will hardly dare to attempt to keep the child from me," he murmured, communing with himself as he strode along.

"Still there's no telling what a woman of her stamp may not attempt. She may think that aided by her husband's wealth she will be able to make a successful fight, but if she tries it, I fancy that she will soon discover, that Judge Jones is not the only man in the world who is possessed of good financial backing."

"I will give her until to-morrow morning, and then if she dares to defy me I will soon convince her that it was an unwise action on her part."

When Crowningshield arrived at the house he found Old Lead Pencil sitting on the front steps.

The old fellow rose and ducked his head at the approach of the gentleman.

"I made bold, guv'nor, for to squat on yer stoop," he explained.

"I was kinder tuckered out, an' hadn't no place for to go, an' I thought I might as well squat here as anywhere."

"Then, too, guv'nor, I'll own I was mighty anxious for to hear how you came out with that durned tiger-cat of a woman."

"You have earned your hundred dollars; come in and I will give it to you."

The old fellow took a sly glance at the face of Crowningshield, as the gentleman passed him on the steps and entered the house by the aid of his latch-key, and from the expression thereon he fancied he could get an idea of what had taken place between him and the woman he had sought.

"There was war—war to the knife, an' red-hot, too, an' I'll bet on it," Old Lead Pencil muttered as he followed Crowningshield into the house.

The gentleman led the way into the smoking-room at the end of the entry.

"Sit down and wait for a moment while I get you the money."

With a grin the old fellow obeyed.

Crowningshield proceeded up-stairs to the library, took a hundred dollars in bills out of the safe there, then returned to the smoking-room and counted the money into Old Lead Pencil's eager hand.

The dull eyes of the vagrant fairly danced.

Such a windfall as this had not come in his way for many a long day.

"I was squar, wasn't I, guv'nor?" he exclaimed, as he proceeded to fold up the bills and stow them away in his pocket.

"Straight as a string, hey?"

"Oh, you kin bet yer bottom dollar that I wouldn't go in for to play any sich gen'leman as you are for a sucker."

"Oh, no, that ain't the kind of a galoot that I am. You found her all right, didn't yer, but how did she take it?"

"Showed fight, I'll go bail. I tell you, guv'nor, the way she checked me was a caution, but I reckoned she wouldn't dare to play that game on you, 'cos there's a heap of difference between a poor old cuss like me an' a gen'leman of your kidney. But in course with you she wouldn't dare for to deny that she was Roxanna Merivale, the gal that you picked out of the gutter, an' was soft enuff—meaning no offense, you know—for to marry."

"You are acquainted, I presume, with all the particulars of her early life?" Crowningshield asked, thus parrying the question.

"You bet I am!" Old Lead Pencil exclaimed. "Why, guv'nor, I know all 'bout that gal as well as she knows herself."

"She used to live in some little village in Kansas."

"I know the place—an' durned good cause I have for to remember it, too," the old man observed with a grimace.

"Oh, I know it, an' know no good of it, too,

'cos the town an' I didn't git along pretty well, I thank you."

"It's down in Southwestern Kansas, right into a corner nigh to Missouri and the Injua Territory. Chetopa, it's called."

"You have given me some valuable information," Crowningshield observed, quietly, and the old man immediately began to look uneasy. It was not his custom to give anything to anybody if he could help it.

"Valuable information, hey?" he asked.

"Yes," and then Crowningshield proceeded to rehearse the story that the woman had told him in regard to the twin sisters.

"It's a durned lie!" he exclaimed, after Crowningshield had finished.

"Tain't no sich thing! I knowed Sol Merivale as well as I know myself, and he never had but one gal—only one child, anyway, an' she was allers as ugly an' contrary as sin."

"That yarn is all got up for to fool you, Mister Crowningshield, jest to throw you off the track, an' for to make you believe that she is dead, but she ain't. She's Roxanna Merivale an' there ain't no mistake 'bout it."

"She denies, too, that she has my boy, and declares that she has not seen the child."

"That's another lie!" Old Lead Pencil exclaimed. "I know she has seen the kid, for I was a-passin' along Tremont street to-day, when the youngster was a-playin' inside the railing on the Common, an' jest then she rode by in her carriage an' I know from the way she squinted at the kid that she recognized him."

"Oh, you know my boy?"

"Yes, I heard one of the kids he was playin' with call him by name; Adonis, that's him, isn't it," replied Old Lead Pencil, unblushingly.

"That is his name."

"An'—beggin' yer pardon for bein' so impudent as to ax the question—wot did you say to her when she tried to stuff sich a yarn down yer throat?"

"I told her that I did not believe it, and then she offered to give me particulars so I could ascertain for myself that Roxanna Merivale died and was buried at Chicago some nine years ago."

"Bosh! sich a trick as that kin be worked easy enuff in sich a big place as Chicago. How easy to find out some poor gal jest a-goin' to kick the bucket, an' bribe her or the people wot had charge on her fur to have her called any name yer wanted!"

"Oh, that's the thinnest kind of a trick!"

"So I told her, and informed her at the same time that all the information I wanted was the name of the Kansas village where Solomon Merivale was hanged by the lynchers."

The old man turned ghastly pale and for a moment Crowningshield thought that he was going to faint, for he seemed as if he was about to slide from the chair to the floor.

"What is the matter, man, are you ill?" the host exclaimed, springing to his assistance.

"I'm faint, that's all; you've given me an awful turn," replied Old Lead Pencil, feebly.

Crowningshield, from the closet at the end of the room, procured a glass of brandy, which he tendered to the old man.

The vagrant drained it as eagerly as though it was so much water.

"Aha, that puts life into a man," he remarked, smacking his lips with satisfaction, and no wonder for it had been many a year since he had enjoyed such liquor.

"When you talked about that 'ere calamity it sort of upset me, 'cos I came within an ace of being strung up too."

"You see I was a pard of Sol Merivale's, an' the gang sot out fer to hang both on us at first. Oh, it was a narrer squeeze fer me I tell yer, an' I never thinks of the thing that it don't make the cold shivers run all over me."

"The story of the twin girls then is a falsehood?"

"It is; as big a whopper as I ever heered."

"I gave her until to-morrow to send my boy home, and told her plainly that if she attempted to detain him, I should call upon the police for aid."

"That's the talk, guv'nor," and the old fellow brought his hand down upon his knee with a vigorous slap.

"Go ter her with the peelers; snatch her bald-headed, an' I'll put in a leetle detective work in this 'ere business too. I'll spy 'round the house commencin' to-night an' mebbe I'll light on somethin' wuth knowin'."

Crowningshield assured the old man that he would pay liberally for any information and then the vagabond departed.

Little Goldenlocks did not return home, and in the morning Old Lead Pencil made his appearance, but was obliged to confess that he had obtained no news.

To the chief of police then Crowningshield went and laid the matter before him.

The chief who had come to regard the young man as a personal friend by this time, thought the matter over carefully.

"It's a delicate case and we must not be rash," he said. "Come with me; we will call upon this Judge Jefferson Jones and see what he has to say about the matter before we put the machinery of the law in motion."

CHAPTER XX.

THE COPPER KING.

"It is hardly possible," the chief explained, "that a man like Judge Jones would like to become mixed up in a case of this kind, particularly where there is a child concerned."

"It won't do any harm to see him and have a quiet talk over the matter. Then we can ascertain just exactly how far he is prepared to back the woman."

"It may be, you know, that he didn't know anything about the matter, and the lady may be pulling the wool over his eyes as expertly as when she performed the operation with you."

"Judging from your story she is at the top of the heap in her line, and it is just possible she has roped the judge in for a flat and that he doesn't understand what kind of a heifer she is, anyway."

"That may be true; yet she seemed very sure of her position and did not shrink in the least when I told her I was resolved to hunt her down," Crowningshield remarked.

"Oh, she was trying to bluff you, you know; that's the game they always try to play; but speculation won't help us any, so let's be off and get at some facts."

It was an easy matter for the pair to find the office of Judge Jones, which was located within a stone's throw of the old State House, down in the region sacred to the busy money-makers.

The judge's rooms were fitted up in magnificent style; there were a pair of apartments: an outer office, where a sober-faced, elderly clerk presided, and an inner one where the judge received the callers who desired to see him on particular business.

Crowningshield acted as spokesman, and to the clerk expressed his desire to see Judge Jones on some matter of importance.

"Certainly, sir; the judge is always ready to receive visitors when not engaged," the clerk said. "What name, sir?"

"Crowningshield."

Thereupon the clerk led the way into the judge's sanctum.

"Mr. Crowningshield," the clerk said, introducing the visitors, and then discreetly retired.

The judge was one of those kind of men who prided himself on the fact that he never put on any airs.

As he was won't to remark:

"I'm a true democrat from 'way back, and you won't find any frills about me."

On the present occasion, when the visitors entered, he was enjoying a cigar, with his chair tilted back and his legs on the desk before which he sat.

"Crowningshield, eh?" he exclaimed, removing his legs from the desk, rising to his feet, and shaking hands with both of the gentlemen in the most cordial manner.

Crowningshield would fain have drawn back, but the judge was so extremely cordial that it was impossible to do so without being rude.

"Sit down, gentlemen, sit down and make yourselves at home! You're as welcome as the flowers in May. Have a cigar!" and the judge produced a box from one of the recesses of the desk.

"No cabbage-leaves about these—genuine article, I assure you; I import 'em myself, a hundred boxes at a time, and so I know what I'm talking about. It costs me a small fortune for cigars, but then a man who is in public life, as I am, must expect to stand the racket."

"There isn't anything that smooths the way to a business transaction like a good cigar or a glass of good liquor."

"And that reminds me, gentlemen, will you take something with me?"

"Call for almost anything you like, and I guess I will be able to fill the bill," and he waved his hand toward a large and imposing book-case which was apparently stocked with law books in the regulation sheep.

"All dummies, gentlemen, and inside is as fine a stock of liquors as any man will be able to serve up from Maine to California, bar none!"

"I am much obliged for your kind offer, but must decline," Crowningshield remarked as he sat down.

"You must try something?" said the judge.

"Really you'll have to excuse me," the chief replied, as he too took a seat, but at the same time there was a wistful look in his eyes as he glanced at the bookcase.

"Oh, that's all right, only wanted to make you feel comfortable and at home, you know," and then the judge deposited his solid substance in the chair from which he had arisen.

"Crowningshield?" he remarked, in a tone of question. "That's a good old Boston name. I'm a Boston boy myself, you know, gentlemen, though I left the Hub years ago to seek my fortune in the West, and didn't come back until I made my little pile."

"By Jove! Crowningshield, I'd like to rope you into one of my mining speculations—your name at the head of the concern, president, or something of that sort, would be a big thing—bet confidence, you know, and confidence in this world is a big aid in making money."

"I've got some big schemes on hand, and, if

you cared to invest fifty or a hundred thousand dollars, I could let you in on the ground floor—fix it, you know, so that you could make a hundred per cent. on your investment, and that sort of thing, I take it, is a pretty good rake for any man to corral in these hard times," and then the copper king leaned back in his chair and "beamed" on his visitors.

"I'm very much obliged to you for your offer, but I'm not dabbling in any speculations at present," Crowningshield replied.

"I come to see you, Mr. Jones—"

"Judge Jones, if you please, Mr. Crowningshield. Don't forget my handle, for heaven's sake!" interrupted the other, pathetically.

"You see I'm so used to the title that it sounds real unpleasant to be mistered, although once in a while, out in the Superior region, some of the boys who don't like me as well as they might, call me Old Jones, but not to my face, you know, except when there's a strike and trouble."

The judge was evidently a character.

"I've not the least objection to giving you your title, judge," the young man remarked.

"But, as I was about to say, I came to see you on particular business—a private personal matter, and delicate in its import."

"Great Scott!" exclaimed the old man, abruptly. "I tell you what it is, Crowningshield, I know exactly what you are driving at, and I don't see any use to beat about the bush."

"I'm jest one of the plainest, bluntest men you can scare up from here to California, and I'm old business right from the word go."

"My little woman told me last night about this little trouble, and I kinder had an idea that you might come in to see me this morning, because that is the way I do business."

"If I've got anything to say to a man I always go right to him and say it, and have the matter out then and there."

"That's my idea of how business should be worked in this here life. The plain, straightforward way is always the best."

"But I say, old fellow, this little matter is a rather delicate one to discuss before people," he added abruptly, with a look at the Chief of Police.

"I suppose, though, that you have perfect confidence in your friend here?"

"The gentleman is the Chief of Police," replied Crowningshield, gravely, not at all inclined to treat the matter with the levity the judge displayed.

Jones instantly bounded to his feet, and walking over to the police chief shook hands with him in such a cordial way that the worthy thief-taker was almost overpowered by the warmth of the greeting.

"Upon my word, I assure you, it gives me the utmost pleasure to make your acquaintance, chief!" the judge declared.

"There's nothing like having a friend at court, you know, and if I should happen to get into any trouble one of these days, how handy it would be for me to be able to appeal to the Chief of Police on the score of personal acquaintance. D'ye see?"

And then the judge poked the chief in the ribs in the most friendly manner possible.

There was no mistaking the fact that the judge was about as odd a man as one would be apt to encounter in a long day's journey.

"Well, I always try to be useful to my friends," the chief remarked.

"Oh, I can see that in your face," responded the judge with a knowing wink, and then he resumed his seat.

"Now, old fellow, go ahead," he said, nodding to Crowningshield.

"It's a deuced ugly business, of course, all these women affairs are, but I reckon we can straighten it out somehow, and I think it mighty lucky that you brought our friend, the chief, along with you, for he's used to all kind of rack-ets of this sort, and will be able to give us good advice."

Crowningshield did not know exactly what to make of the judge.

Surely the affair was too grave to be treated in this fashion.

The only reasonable explanation was that despite his statement the copper king was not acquainted with all the details of the matter, but was only partially informed.

The siren might have made him a dupe also; to the mind of the young man this seemed very likely indeed, therefore Crowningshield determined to explain the matter so that it could not be misunderstood.

"I presume the best way to get at it will be for me to make a statement of the position which I occupy," Crowningshield remarked.

"Yes, yes, that will tend to simplify matters, but I say, gentlemen, as talking is dry work, suppose we all wet our whistles before we begin?" suggested the judge.

"No, thank you," said the young man.

The chief also declined, but for all that there was a longing look in his eyes.

"Have some cigars, anyway," persisted the judge.

Again Crowningshield declined, but the chief accepted a cigar, and the judge chose a fresh one for himself.

Then, when the "weeds" were lighted, the copper king, laying back in his chair, assumed as comfortable an attitude as he could, and said: "Now, fire away, old fellow!"

CHAPTER XXI.

THE JUDGE'S GAME.

"I must go back ten years," began Crowningshield.

"About that time I married a lady whose maiden name was Roxanna Merivale. A child was the result of that union, and before the infant was a year old my wife suddenly disappeared, leaving a brief note behind in which she bade me farewell forever, but assigned no reason for her seemingly unaccountable action."

"The blow was a heavy one, and the stroke was all the more terrible from being so entirely unexpected."

"Of course, of course, I can readily understand that," the copper king commented.

"I was satisfied that there must be some dark mystery connected with the affair, and I resolved to solve it if the task took all the rest of my life."

"I have spared neither time nor money, but all to no avail, until at last accident brought me face to face with the lady known as your wife."

"I see, I see!" exclaimed the judge, with a chuckle, as if he thought it was a good joke.

"And the moment you saw my little woman you thought you recognized in her your long-lost spouse, hey?"

"Yes, sir, I am certain that she is the girl who once called herself Roxanna Merivale, and whom I married," Crowningshield said, firmly.

"No wonder; the resemblance between her and Roxanna was truly wonderful; she explained to you all about her twin sister, of course. I must admit I never saw such a resemblance in my life. I've often heard of just such a thing, of course, but I never personally encountered it until I run across these two girls. Most wonderful, I assure you," and then the judge leaned back in his chair and smiled upon his hearers as though he was perfectly satisfied that his words had dispelled all the doubt that Crowningshield felt.

And now came the difficult part, for it isn't a pleasant thing to be obliged to tell a man to his face that you don't believe him.

But the young man had all the dogged firmness of his old Puritan race latent in him, and on this occasion he was equal to the emergency.

"Do I understand you to say, judge, that of your own knowledge, you knew these two twin sisters, Roselle and Roxanna?" he asked, looking the copper king straight in the eye.

"Yes, certainly, of my own knowledge," replied the judge, never flinching from the gaze in the least, and smiling in the blandest manner possible.

"There were two sisters by the name of Merivale, Roselle and Roxanna."

"Roxanna you married, and for certain reasons, as my wife explained, she thought herself obliged to go away from you."

"It was a foolish thing for her to do, of course, but then women will do just such stupid things. She came to her sister in Chicago, got a divorce there from you, and shortly afterwards died. Just about that time I married her sister, and so happened to know all about the matter."

"Judge, it is not a pleasant thing for a man to be obliged to tell another that he hasn't any confidence in what he says, but under the circumstances I am forced to do so."

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the copper king, as though the other had given utterance to a good joke.

"My wife told me that I would find you a doubting Thomas, but I 'allowed,' as we say in the Southwest, that I would be able to convince you that the story was a true one."

"There's ample proof of the death of Roxanna Merivale in Chicago, you know, and I can post you so that you can put your hand right on it."

Crowningshield shook his head.

"Deception in such a matter as this is easy, and after this lapse of years it would be an almost impossible matter to prove that the girl who died in Chicago and was buried under the name of Roxanna Merivale, either was or was not the woman to whom I refer."

"Very true, very true," remarked the judge, nodding his head sagely.

"One point you can get at, though, without the least bit of trouble, and there's no getting around it, either—Roxanna Merivale got a divorce from you in Chicago."

"But without giving me any notice, and possibly our laws in this State would not be apt to regard the decree as possessing any weight."

"That's a question for the lawyers to settle, you know, and law is a mighty uncertain thing I can tell you. I've been 'thar' many a time, and I know what I'm talking about."

"But it seems to me—meaning no offense, you know—that you are a hard man to satisfy."

"No; on the contrary, I can be easily satisfied. Give me proof that there were two Merivale sisters—that they were twins. Such evidence can be easily gotten at in the town of Chetopa, Kansas, where the family resided."

"Well, hang me, if you ain't posted," and again the copper king chuckled.

He was not seemingly disposed to look upon the matter in a serious light at all.

"Now see here, Crowningshield, old fellow, all I know about the matter goes back ten years only, and not beyond."

"I don't know anything about the twin sisters in Chetopa; don't know anything about the family anyway, and don't want to, either."

"I happened to run across my little woman in Chicago, and she suited me, so I took her. I hate like thunder to get mixed up in this business, anyway, but I've got to stand up for my wife, you know."

"Now, when a man gets tangled up in an affair of this sort, the best thing for him to do is to ascertain exactly how he stands. Ain't that so?"

"Yes, most decidedly."

"Well, s'pose I calculate the thing out as it seems to me?"

"Very well."

Crowningshield did not exactly comprehend the meaning of the other, but he judged it wise to allow him to explain.

"Now, then, first and foremost," said the judge, "you believe that the lady you saw last night, and who is now called Mrs. Judge Jones, is the same woman whom you married ten years ago, and who was then called Roxanna Merivale?"

"You are right, I do, sir," Crowningshield answered firmly.

"Well, now, just for the sake of argument let us admit that she is," observed the judge greatly to the astonishment of the others.

"Let us admit that your suspicions are right and that she is Roxanna Merivale, the woman who was your wife ten years ago and who fled from you apparently without reason."

"She went to Chicago and got a divorce. You'll find, sir, that there isn't any mistake about that."

"Whether that divorce will stand in case you attempt to fight is a question which can only be decided by a suit at law."

"In my opinion the decree is good, for all the forms of the law were complied with, and if the Illinois divorce law happens to be a loose one, calculated to aid in the easy shuffling off of the nuptial yoke, it isn't any business of any other State and I reckon in such a case as this Massachusetts will not attempt to ride over Illinois."

"Then there's the identity question, always a difficult one to handle after the lapse of years. You'll have to prove to the satisfaction of the lawyers that the woman who denies so stoutly that she was ever known as Roxanna Merivale is that party."

"And now, supposing you go in for all this, what are you going to make out of it?"

"Just consider that point."

"Of course I tell you frankly I will be obliged to defend her to the best of my ability. She's my wife, you know, and I've got to stand up for her, no matter if it costs me a million."

"And, old fellow, if you have kept your eyes peeled in regard to little disturbances in this line you must know that a pretty woman with good looks generally succeeds in getting out of these scrapes."

"All you could do, you see, would be to go for her for bigamy; she pleads the Chicago divorce and then where are you?"

"You raise an awful row, cover yourself with mud and me too, and all for what?"

"Revenge, that's all you can gain," he continued answering the question which he had asked.

"She wouldn't come back to live with you, and if she would, you wouldn't have her, if you are the man I take you to be, even if she was to go down on her bended knees and beg for the chance."

"You are right, I admit that," Crowningshield remarked.

"A woman who has deceived me once never should have the chance to repeat the offense."

"Exactly! that is what I thought. I would have bet money on it!" the judge declared, emphatically.

"Now for my position in this matter: I'm an odd old codger and always had the name of being so. When a whim seizes me I carry it out regardless of the cost."

"When I was a poor man I made a resolution that if I was ever a rich one two things in this world I'd have; the fastest horse and the handsomest woman that could be found."

"The pacer is in my stable and the woman in my house. I didn't ask her either whether she cared for me or not, but I bought her—bought her without asking any questions, and now that I've got her, why, old fellow, you can't blame me if I try to keep her."

"But my child—my boy who has been taken away!" exclaimed Crowningshield abruptly.

"There you are out—upon my word you are!" protested the judge.

"Mrs. J. says she doesn't know anything about him, and that you are entirely mistaken in thinking that he is in her care, and, Crowningshield, I believe she speaks the truth; why should she want the child?"

"I'd put a veto on that business mighty

quick, I tell you; but if you don't believe me, you are at perfect liberty to search the house, and question every one in it, for I won't have any child business in mine, I can tell you that."

Both of the visitors were convinced that the judge was not deceiving them, and so expressed themselves.

"Take time to think the matter over before you make a move," the copper king suggested, as the two rose to depart.

"But if you'll take my advice you'll let the thing slide."

Crowningshield replied that he would consider the matter, and then accompanied by the Chief of Police, he left the apartment.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE DECISION.

No words passed between Crowningshield and the Chief of Police until they were in the street.

Then the chief remarked, abruptly:

"It's an ugly business, isn't it?"

"Yes, and I must confess I am sorely puzzled."

"That old fellow is a character," the other observed. "He knew that you had come to see him on an extremely disagreeable bit of business, and yet he tried to talk you into taking a flyer in his mining speculation."

"I tell you, Mr. Crowningshield, the judge has got an awful nerve, and that good natured way of his is all put on; but it wouldn't prevent him from being ugly though. He's like the fellow in the play who says, 'I can smile, and murder while I smile.'"

"Yes, there is no doubt about that, and he has made up his mind to protect the woman, too, at all hazards."

"Oh, you can bet on that! He came out flat-footed as far as that was concerned. And really, Mr. Crowningshield, there was a good deal of sound sense in what he said."

"It's a mighty difficult case, and although in my mind there isn't the least bit of doubt that the woman is the same one who deserted you years ago; yet it will be a very difficult matter to prove it to the satisfaction of an average jury."

"You see the way I came to my conclusion was this. Your story was fresh in my memory, and when I heard his yarn, it was easy to get at the truth."

"The woman was an adventuress—one of the Bohemian kind, you know, who couldn't content herself with a quiet life, and then such a man as yourself was a living reproach to her."

"You see her position with you was something similar to the old-time fellow who had the sword suspended over him by a single hair."

"She was living over a volcano, you see, which was likely to burst forth and overwhelm her at any moment."

"Yes, that was probably the truth, although I had no suspicion of it at the time."

"Not the least doubt about it; now that I have the clews in my hands, it's as plain to me as the nose on your face."

"In the first place, here was Old Lead Pencil a-pulling on her. She was under his thumb, of course, for if she didn't pony up the cash when he called for it, he'd be certain to raise a row."

"Then there was the danger that some one who knew her when she was traveling round with the gambler might run across and recognize her, and then there would be the deuce to pay."

"I had such perfect faith in her though, that I should not have believed anything that might have been said against her," the young man observed.

"Yes, but some of your folks would have been apt to raise a breeze about the matter, and she was shrewd enough to take into consideration all such points."

"This old fellow happened to come across her at that time, and she understood that he was a man who didn't care a continental for her past life. Of course she might have met him after she left you, but I have jumped to the conclusion that she made sure of him before she left you."

"Then she went to Chicago and got the divorce from you; that done, she was free to marry him."

"Do you see how shrewdly the woman played her cards?"

"She was careful to cut loose from you before she entangled herself with him, and then she was wise enough to get him to tie the knot which bound them together in the most secure manner."

"She wasn't taking any chances, and made up her mind to have things arranged so that if he ever became tired of her, she could not be sent adrift without warning."

"Who could believe that with that angelic face and perfect form, she was such a cunning demon?" Crowningshield exclaimed.

"No one; and on that fact she trades," the Chief of Police replied promptly.

"That is her cash capital, and you can bet your life she handles it for all it is worth."

"Then in your judgment, it will be useless to attempt to punish her?"

"Yes, I am sorry to be obliged to say it, but

that is my belief, and it's no use for me to attempt to deny it. She has played her cards so well, and with the judge's money to back her, in my opinion the odds are about ten to one that she would win the fight; and then consider your boy, what a reproach it would be to him if you punished the mother."

"No, no, Mr. Crowningshield, take my advice and let the matter drop. The woman is dead, for all the world at large knows; where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise, you know, so let the matter drop."

"You have satisfied your mind, you have solved the mystery of her sudden disappearance, and so be content."

"But my boy—I cannot allow him to remain with her!" Crowningshield exclaimed. "Despite the judge's denial, I am sure the child is with its mother."

"Oh, we must attend to that, of course," the chief replied.

"I think the judge was speaking the truth as far as he was concerned—that is to the best of his knowledge and belief, as the lawyers say—for most assuredly he wouldn't want your child, and despite all his apparent good nature, I've an idea that he would be just the kind of a man to rule with a rod of iron any woman whom he had bought for her looks, just as if she was a dog or horse."

"You can depend upon it, as far as he is concerned, he will not allow her to have anything to do with the child."

"I believe you are right there; I think he spoke the truth when he said he did not wish to be mixed up in the matter."

"Oh, that was honest; there isn't any doubt about it in my mind. But a woman like this one, is apt to be up to all sorts of tricks, and you can bet that she knows the old man like a book. She understands that he wouldn't back her up as far as the child is concerned and that she must work in the dark if she tried any funny business with the boy."

"Now the game is to put a watch upon the woman and upon everybody who goes in or comes out of the house."

"She has caused the child to be carried away and secreted somewhere and sooner or later she will have communications with the party who has the child."

"I confess her action puzzles me for I don't see what she wants with the child anyway, except as a hostage to make you come to terms if you show an inclination to be ugly."

"Yes, that may be the idea."

"Suppose I wait upon the lady and tell her that you have made up your mind not to trouble her," the chief suggested, but Crowningshield interrupted him quickly.

"Ah, but I haven't made up my mind to anything of the kind," he said, firmly.

"I admit that your opinion that it will be an almost impossible matter to punish this vile creature has many things to sustain it; but I should be false to the duty I owe to the world at large if I did not attempt to expose and punish this woman."

"She has wrecked all my life and there is no justice in this world if a fearful vengeance does not fall upon her guilty head."

"Ever since the time of her unaccountable disappearance I have labored faithfully to solve the mystery and now that I have discovered how fearfully I have been wronged I will devote all my energies to punishing this heartless creature who beneath an angelic guise conceals the heart of a fiend."

"She must be taught that there is such a thing as justice in this world and that such guilt as hers will not be allowed to go unpunished."

The chief did not speak for a few moments, being busy in reflection.

In his practical way he had come to the conclusion that the whole thing was an ugly bit of business and that the sooner it was dropped the better, yet still he could not gainsay that Crowningshield was right, and when he came to question himself about the affair, he could not deny that if he was in the situation of the other, he would not be a whit more ready to allow the woman to enjoy the fruits of her guilt.

"You're right, sir!" he exclaimed at last.

"You're right for a thousand dollars."

"I was only giving you a lawyer's opinion when I advocated letting the matter drop, but as a man, I'd be mighty apt to think as you do about the matter."

"Yes, and to that end I shall from this moment forth bend all my energies. The judge is presumed to be a wealthy man, but it is a difficult matter to tell how these speculators really stand sometimes."

"His wealth may be all a sham and a single severe reverse would reveal the truth to the world. Take this last year for instance; think how many of these so-called millionaire speculators have been forced to the wall—think how many of these reputed colossal fortunes have taken unto themselves wings and flown away when a sudden commercial crash let in the light, and creditors demanded cash instead of paper."

"That's very true, we can never tell anything certain about these railroad and mining sharps. The biggest of them bust up some-

times and don't leave much more behind than an exploded balloon.

"When this man espouses the cause of the woman who has proved herself to be so worthless he exposes himself to an attack and he must not complain if the blows fall thick and heavy upon him.

"I have a suspicion that it may be possible that it was this man with his money who lured the false-hearted woman away from me; of course if this is the truth it does not make her blame any the less."

"Not at all. Well, it's to be fight then!" exclaimed the chief, briskly. "Cry havoc and let slip the dogs of war!" as the poet says. I can't take a hand in the fight except to recover the child, but to do that I'll give you the best men on the detective force."

"I shall try to do a little in that line myself, and I have a couple of friends who will aid me."

And so he two walked on arranging the plan of the campaign.

CHAPTER XXIII.

DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND.

THE shades of night were just beginning to darken, and Mrs. Judge Jones sat in her luxuriant parlor, gazing through one of the windows into the street.

Her brow was troubled, and the restless tapping of her jeweled fingers upon the window-pane betokened anxious thought.

And there was cause for her alarm, too.

The judge had decided to close all his Boston business and transfer his head-quarters to New York, and therefore had offered his mansion for sale, fully furnished, just as it was, and that morning the real estate agent in whose hands the property had been placed, waited upon her and asked permission to bring a gentleman to inspect the house in the afternoon.

In the afternoon the gentleman came, and a most thorough examination he made of the premises from the cellar to the garret.

The lady took a dislike to the man at first sight, although he appeared to be a perfect gentleman, but like many another in this life particularly those belonging to the vast and almost indescribable body, known as Bohemians, she was a prey to superstition in a certain way and believed in presentiments and warning.

And as it happened the moment she set eyes upon the stranger some secret monitor within whispered that he was a foe.

The inspection of the house was but an excuse; he had come there to play the role of a spy.

And then after the gentleman had departed, she happened to glance out of one of the windows and caught sight of a shabbily dressed man, a sort of a notion peddler with a small basket squatting upon the doorstep of one of the opposite houses.

And when after a while one of the servants drove him off he went down the street a few yards and took up his position on another step.

He did not appear to be the least anxious whether he sold anything or not and the same subtle instinct which made the lady suspect that the gentleman was a spy also convinced her that this peddler had no other business in the street except to keep a watch upon her house.

Then, after awhile happening to look out of one of the rear windows, her attention was attracted by a couple of men engaged in building a grape arbor in the yard of the house on the next street, right back of her mansion.

One man worked away diligently and handled his tools with the skill of a practiced workman, but the other had that peculiar air about him which generally comes to the man-hunter after long years of practice, and he was not anywhere near as expert with his tools as the other, and the lady set him down at once for a police spy.

It was evident the house was watched both front and rear, and the game was being carried on in the most skillful manner.

Late in the afternoon too Old Lead Pencil came skulking through the street, and the presence of the old tramp in the vicinity was a sure indication that mischief was afoot.

About dusk the judge arrived and the lady met him in the hall.

The gentleman was not in a particularly good humor as was apparent immediately to the practiced eyes of the lady by the expression upon his face.

He followed her into the parlor, seated himself in one of the chairs, by the window, and his gaze happening to wander through it fell upon the shabby-looking man seated upon the doorstep on the opposite side of the street.

"Aha!" he exclaimed, "that's suspicious!"

"What is the matter?" the lady asked, although she had a shrewd suspicion as to the cause of the exclamation.

"Do you see that seedy-looking fellow over yonder on the doorstep?"

"Yes, I have noticed him before; he has been there nearly all the afternoon, or to speak more correctly he was sitting on the steps of the house directly opposite when I first saw him, but a servant drove him off and then he moved up the street to where he now is."

"That fellow is a spy, confound him!"

growled the judge angrily, and he is watching this house.

"But why should he do that?" inquired the lady in the most innocent manner possible.

"Oh, there's reason enough for it," replied the judge, and then he gave her a full account of the interview which had taken place that morning between himself, Howard Crowningshield and the Chief of Police.

"I expected that there would be trouble, and if you remember I told you so. I did not want to come to Boston, but you forced me to do so."

"I knew that it would be dangerous, but you insisted, and now if there is trouble you have no one to blame but yourself."

The tone in which she spoke irritated the judge, and he retorted:

"Hang it, madam, I want you to understand that I am going to be master in my own house, and then, too, I do not intend to be trammelled in my movements."

"If I see fit to come to Boston, I am going to come, and if anybody dares to attack me, they must stand the consequences."

"Then if you have made up your mind to that, why are you annoyed?" she asked. "If you are prepared for war, why grumble when the struggle approaches?"

"Oh, that's all very well, madam, but it is not pleasant to have a lot of infernal police spies dogging your footsteps just as if you were a criminal liable to arrest."

"In an hour after these two men quitted my office a watch was set upon me. I had occasion to go down State street on business and was obliged to stop into half a dozen places, and a gentlemanly-looking scoundrel was at my heels all the time."

"I did not leave the office this afternoon without being spied upon by the fellow, and he even tracked me clear to this when I came home. I got inside of the car and he staid on the rear platform, and when I got off he followed at a safe distance behind, and I've no doubt that while this seedy fellow keeps watch at one end of the street, my follower is on guard at the other."

"But I do not understand the object of this movement; what is to be gained by it?" she asked.

"Why, he hopes to get some clew so that he will be able to recover the child that you were fool enough to take away!" the judge snarled.

"If you had not meddled with the child, I don't believe there would have been a bit of trouble."

"But that idea is ridiculous!" the lady declared, angrily.

"I hain't got the man's child, and know nothing whatever about him!"

"Yes; I know you say so, and I told him that I didn't believe you knew anything about the matter, and most surely I did not, and I would not allow you to get mixed up in the affair if I had any say about it, but I don't think he believed me, and when I was making it the idea came into my head that perhaps I was a little weak-minded to believe it myself."

"You women take strange notions sometimes—you yield to whims that a man would laugh at. It occurred to me that it was possible you had encountered the child and yielded to the temptation to steal it."

"If that is the truth you must give it up; you understand me, madam, you must give it up for I will not allow you to make a fool of yourself in any such way."

The angry words and the brutal way in which they were spoken aroused the rage of the woman.

She was no saint, and possessed a demon-like temper, although she was such a complete mistress of herself that she rarely allowed it to become manifest, but on the present occasion her rage blazed forth fiercely.

"Don't dare to talk to me like that!" she cried, a red, hectic spot visible in her pale cheeks.

"I am not your slave, although for years you have treated me like one and I have submitted for the sake of the money that you lavished upon me."

"It was your money bought me in the first place; you ought not to forget that; I never attempted to deceive you in that respect whatever I may have done in others."

The copper king, although so genial and good-natured abroad, was a perfect tyrant at home, and as his wife had always patiently borne with his moods and made no protest, he was amazed at her boldness in thus openly bearding him.

"Madam, do you dare to use such language to me?" he exclaimed, red in the face with rage.

"Yes, I dare! What do I care for you except for what you give me?" she retorted in defiance.

"Oh, that is all, is it? Well, I'll soon arrange that. I picked you out of the gutter, and the hand that lifted you up can also throw you down."

"No, you make a mistake about that!" the lady answered, scornfully.

"With all your shrewdness you made a blunder when you took me, if you did so with the

idea that you could get rid of me when you pleased. I am your lawfully wedded wife, and although I am ready to be deprived of the pleasure of your agreeable society at a moment's notice, yet you must pay the bills incurred for my support, and I can assure you I intend to live in a manner becoming to the wife of the man who is known as the great copper king."

For a few moments the judge was speechless, from the effects of rage and amazement combined, and when he had recovered the use of his tongue, his first impulse was to bid the defiant woman leave his house and never darken his door again, but then reflection came to his aid, and as he thought over the matter for the first time, he understood what kind of a woman his wife really was.

In an instant, as it were, a veil had been removed from his eyes, and he saw clearly.

She knew what she was about, undoubtedly had money saved up to aid her to fight her battles, and would surely prove troublesome.

And so, he choked his rage, as well as he could.

"Well, it is of no use for us to quarrel," he observed. "If you haven't the child, we can laugh at Crowningshield, although I don't doubt he will do all in his power to worry us."

"As you please," she remarked, indifferently.

And so a truce was patched up between them.

After supper the judge went out to his club, leaving his wife to enjoy her meditations in solitude.

CHAPTER XXIV.

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

THE presence of the detective annoyed Mrs. Judge Jones, for, like the judge, the idea that she was watched was distasteful to her, but she consoled herself with the thought that when they satisfied themselves that the missing child was not with her the watch would be withdrawn.

The man was still at his post on the other side of the street, for she could easily distinguish his figure by the aid of the street lights.

"Let him stay there until the crack of doom!" she exclaimed in contempt. "What care I?"

Then she sat down in the easy-chair by the side of the table upon which the drop-lamp was placed, and endeavored to become interested in the evening newspaper.

But it was hard work for her to fix her mind upon the printed page, for her busy thoughts were elsewhere.

"He is not satisfied with the story I related to him," she murmured, communing aloud with herself. "And he means to make trouble for me if he can."

"Ah, but can he?"

"That is a question that it is almost impossible to answer. The judge declares that even if he goes to law he will not be able to accomplish anything; of course there will be a terrible scandal, but what care I for that?"

And she laughed contemptuously, as she put the question.

"Scandal! What do I care for scandal? So long as I have plenty of money and am able to live in the luxury my nature craves, the tongue of the world may wag about me as it will."

"But then will not the old dead past be raked up?" and her face became clouded as she remembered what could be said of the past.

"Will the judge dare to face the world and still cling to me when the truth is known?"

"No, no, he would not dare, and he would be the first to turn against me, for he is a craven at heart, when the world began to yelp at me."

"I suppose I may as well prepare for the inevitable then."

"Oh, how I hate Crowningshield, although I never received anything but kindness from him, but I can't help it."

"I despised him in the old time for being such a fool as to be so easily tricked, and now that he threatens to punish me for the past, I hate him."

"I believed that I was indifferent in regard to the future. I did not think I cared what became of me, but now that I see before me in the near future the prospect of once again being thrown upon the world, dependent upon my own resources, I am disgusted at the sight."

"True, I have been prudent enough to put by some money in anticipation of such an event as this occurring, but what are a few thousands of dollars to a woman of my extravagant habits."

"I have been so accustomed now to a life of luxury that I would rather die than be reduced to the condition of being obliged to take an account of every penny I spend."

"Oh, this miserable man!" and the woman sprung to her feet as the words escaped from her lips and commenced to pace up and down the apartment, strongly resembling in her motions the caged tiger, restlessly seeking to find a way through the iron bars which hem him in.

It was natural, under the circumstances, that the woman should resemble the caged king of the jungle and the forest wild, for she really felt as if the web of destiny was being slowly drawn around her, and that almost before she knew it she would wake to the consciousness that she was helpless.

"And I have always been so lucky, too," she murmured, as she strode restlessly up and down.

"Fortune has always seemed to favor me so. Whenever I have been closely pushed, fate has always sent some friend to aid me, but, alas! I fear that in this case there is no chance of such a lucky event occurring, for who could I possibly find that would be of any assistance in fighting such a man as Crowningshield?"

Just as the words left her lips there came a ring at the door.

The lady did not expect any callers that evening, but as some of her lady acquaintances were in the habit of running in without warning, in anticipation of some such visit she resumed her place by the center-table and endeavored to compose her features so that they would not show any signs of the stormy gust of passion which had convulsed them.

The negro servant went to the door, held a brief conversation with the person there, and then came into the parlor bearing a card upon his salver.

"Do gomen at de door would like fur to hab de pleasure of a few words wid Missus Judge Jones on important business," said the negro, as he presented the card.

It bore the name—

RAYMOND RANDOLPH.

The woman was in that peculiar state of mind which inclined her to look upon every stranger as being far more likely to turn out to be a foe than a friend.

The name was strange to her, and there wasn't any important business that any one could wish to see her about excepting the one subject which was troubling her so much.

But she had the soul of a hero in her delicate frame, and she did not shrink from the trial, although she had a presentiment that the visit of the stranger meant mischief.

As the sound waves travel through the air, so the subtle instinct which was to predominate in her physical make-up, seemed to warn her of the approach of any one who was destined to have any influence upon her movements.

And though she had not seen this stranger, and she knew nothing of him, for the name even was unfamiliar to her, yet the impression produced by his coming was such that she felt sure some crisis of her life was at hand.

She felt that she was becoming nervous and agitated—something rare for her, for the iron-like nerves which she possessed were seldom troubled by anything.

Her agitation increased so much that she felt constrained to walk into the back parlor, while the servant ushered the gentleman into the front one, so that she might have time to recover herself.

The negro showed the visitor into the room, and then departed to his lair in the basement.

She waited until his footsteps died away on the stairs, then feeling that this time she had in a measure recovered from her strange agitation she returned to the front apartment.

The visitor's attention had been attracted by one of the masterpieces of art that adorned the wall by the door and he stood with his back half-turned to the lady as she came into the apartment, so that his face was hidden from her but there was something so familiar about his figure, something which recalled to her the memory of the man for whom she had left her home and whose wandering footsteps she had been glad to follow, no matter which way they went, that for a moment she felt—to use the old expression, as if her heart was in her mouth.

Then, attracted by the rustling of her dress, the gentleman turned and the two came face to face.

Both started in amazement; simultaneously a cry came from their lips.

"Roxanna!" exclaimed the man.

"Reuben Maxwell!" cried the woman.

And in another moment, forgetful of everything, of time and place—the danger of being spied upon—reckless of all consequences, they rushed into each other's arms.

Roxanna Merivale—for the woman was Roxanna despite all her denials—and the gambler husband whom she had for so many years mourned as dead, were again united.

The woman was the first to recover herself and remember how imprudently they were acting.

"Be careful—we must be on our guard for we are liable to be observed," she continued.

"The house is full of servants and some of them are no better than so many spies; they are apt to be loitering around when they are least expected," and then she withdrew herself from his fond embrace and motioned him to be seated.

Now that the first surprise was over, he had resumed his natural calmness, and helped himself to a chair.

They sat one on each side of the little ornamental center-table and for a moment gazed earnestly at each other, anxious to discover what changes time had wrought.

"Of all the unexpected things!" Randolph exclaimed. We will give him the name by which he was now known, although Reuben Maxwell was really his right appellation.

"I thought you had passed in your checks long ago."

"And I was sure that you had, for with my own eyes I saw you stricken down mortally wounded, shot right through the forehead."

"No, there is where you have made a mistake: the ball only inflicted a slight scalp wound, taking an upward course, and although the blood flowed profusely yet I was not mortally hurt, although I was laid up in a hospital for nearly three months."

"I was sure you had been killed and I did all I could to avenge your death."

"You didn't succeed in doing any particular damage to the men you shot, nor did I for that matter. I was the most injured of the party," he remarked.

"I thought I had killed the two I fired at and believing you to be dead I fled to escape arrest."

"The affair was hushed up; no one happened to take any notice of the row, and when the bloods bound up their wounds, and none of them had anything more than a scratch, they came to the conclusion that the least said about the matter the better; they were men enough to have me lugged off to the hospital, where they told a cock and bull story about how a pistol had accidentally gone off in my hand, and whether the doctors believed it or not, they took me in and took care of me until I was able to get about again."

"It was an ugly wound and I had a close call for my life."

"I do not doubt it," she remarked.

"When I came out I searched for you high and low, couldn't find you and getting a good chance to make a raise in the West, went there, and only came back about three months ago."

"But I say, what are you doing here, rigged out like a queen? By Jove! you are more lovely than ever and you don't look to be a day older, and by-the-by where is Mrs. Judge Jones?"

"I am she," Roxanna replied.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE EXPLANATION.

"You are Mrs. Judge Jones!" he exclaimed, completely astonished by the intelligence.

"Yes, did you not suspect it?"

"No, upon my word I did not; I never even dreamed of such a thing. By what miraculous chance did you secure so rich a prize in the matrimonial market?"

"It was merely by accident and due to the charms with which nature gifted me," the lady replied with a light scornful laugh as if she despised the beauty of face and form which had profited her so much since she came to womanhood.

"After your fall beneath the bullets of your enemies and my mad attempt to avenge your death, I hurried like a crazy woman into the street, making my escape by way of the rear door."

"I had sense enough to snatch up my hat and cloak as I rushed through the rear apartment, eager to escape from the police whom, in my fevered imagination I saw already on the front stairs hurrying upward to drag me to prison."

The instinct of self-preservation was strong within me and led me to make an attempt to escape, although I was in such a state that I was reckless whether I lived or died, but somehow I had a terrible horror of being dragged into a police court and so I fled, not knowing where I went or caring."

"I wanted to get out into the air where I could breathe, for it seemed to me if I remained within walls I should stifle."

"Possibly you will not believe it, Reuben, but you are the only soul whom I have ever encountered that I felt the least degree of affection toward."

"Oh, I can believe that readily enough!" exclaimed the man warmly, extending his hand and clasping her taper fingers within his own strong ones.

"You have given me proof of that a hundred times. I deceived you when I took you away from your country home, and yet you never gave utterance to a single word of complaint."

"I loved you, and was content to follow your fortunes, no matter how hard they might be," she replied, simply.

"But release my hand; we must be on our guard, you know."

"Well, to continue my story, I wandered through the streets, never taking heed which way I went until I found myself on Cambridge bridge."

"When I saw the water—it was a bright moonlight night—the thought came over me that I could find peace and rest beneath the surface of the dark stream, but that idea only lasted a moment, for I am not the kind of girl to throw life away as recklessly as though it could be had for the asking."

"The sound of footsteps approaching on the bridge attracted my attention, and, as near as I could make out, it was a young man, and well-dressed."

"I needed a banker just then, for I was almost penniless, and I made up my mind that this gentleman would do as well as any one. So

I waited until he came so near that I was sure he would see what I was doing, and then I climbed over the fence and descended to the pier upon which the draw worked."

"The plan succeeded to a charm."

"He thought that I intended to commit suicide, just as I expected he would, and hurried to save me."

"He was a perfect gentleman, but oh, so soft, as far as I was concerned," and the ripe, red lips of the woman curled in contempt.

"That is about the way all men are affected who are lucky or unlucky enough to encounter you," the other remarked.

"You are an exception to the rule!" she exclaimed, quickly.

"Well, I don't suppose that I am particularly soft. It isn't my nature to be affected in that way. I don't think I will ever be apt to make a fool of myself for any woman, but I loved you as much as it is possible for me to love any one."

"Oh, I've not the least doubt about that," she remarked, quickly, "and I suppose that it is because you are so different to all the men that I have ever encountered that I feel toward you as I did—and do," she hastened to add.

"For, Reuben, I assure you that, though we have been separated for years, during which time I have mourned you as one dead, yet in my heart I still cherish the same affection that once impelled me to leave home and friends to follow you."

"I'm glad to hear it!" he exclaimed, "for I assure you, Roxanna, you are the only woman that I have ever met who had power at all to quicken the blood in my veins."

"I believe that, for you treated me honestly, although you did feed my imagination with some pretty extensive stories in regard to worldly prospects, but that is all past and gone."

"To resume my story. This gentleman fell over head and ears in love with me at first sight. I told him a fabulous tale, and won his sympathy at once. He said he would see that I did not suffer, and, to come quickly to the end, within a short time he asked me to marry him, and I, careless since I had lost you as to what became of me, consented."

"We were married, and a child was the result of the union."

"And now comes the strange part of my tale. Although this man fairly idolized me, and did all in his power to make me happy, I grew to fairly hate him as time passed on."

"The birth of the child, which ought to have brought us closer together, on the contrary seemed to separate us—or rather, it seemed to push me still further from him, for I played my part so well that he never suspected that I was at all indifferent to him, although I could see that at times he wondered at my coldness."

"You cold!" exclaimed the man—"you, Roxanna, with your heart of fire!"

"Yes; but that heart did not warm to this man, to whom the chance of fate and not my own free will had bound me."

"When the child was a little over a year old, a circumstance occurred which completely altered my way of life."

"Did I ever tell you about a miserable old wretch who knew all the circumstances of my early life?"

"I do not remember that you ever did."

"Well, there is such a man, and he chanced to discover me. He came at a most unlucky moment, too, for my husband was a scion of one of the old and wealthy Boston families, although he had rather hidden this fact from me, and his marriage had been a secret one, for fear of exciting the displeasure of a rich relative from whom he expected one day to inherit wealth."

"At last he had confessed the truth, though, and his uncle, the relative in question, took the matter quite pleasantly, and it was arranged that he was to come and see me."

"Of course, there wasn't the least doubt in my mind that I could produce a favorable impression, and I looked forward to the meeting with pleasure, for I was heartily sick of the quiet, humdrum life I was leading, and longed for money that I might be able, in a whirl of dissipation, to forget the past."

"Just at this moment this miserable wretch—this Old Lead Pencil appeared. He had played the spy; knew exactly how I was situated, and intended to blackmail me for the rest of my life."

"The scoundrel!" the gambler exclaimed. "If I had been in your position, I should have felt like killing him!"

"And so I did, but there were reasons why I could not. And after all, his appearance only served to snatch me from one life into another, so perhaps I ought not to complain."

"A month or so before this event occurred, when I was out one day on an errand, I met Judge Jones."

"The sidewalk was slippery, and I fell. He assisted me to rise, and became a captive to my charms immediately—and he made no difficulty in telling me so. He said outright that I was the only woman in the world he had ever encountered whom he would like to marry; and then he told me that he was a millionaire, and

drew a pretty picture of the life I would enjoy if I entertained his offer."

"You always were lucky," commented the man.

"I neither accepted nor declined, although I told him I was already married. But he said that didn't make any difference. It would be easy enough for me to run away from my husband and he would take me out West where a divorce could be easily obtained.

"So, when Old Lead Pencil threatened to attach himself to me like the Old Man of the Sea to the shoulders of Sindbad, the Sailor, I defeated his game by flying with Judge Jones to Chicago, abandoning the husband whom I hated and the child for whom I never felt a mother's love.

"There in due time a divorce was obtained and then I became Mrs. Judge Jones. You see I have twice committed bigamy, but then I was innocent of any evil intent for I had no idea that you were alive," she said with a light laugh.

"Oh, you're all right as far as I am concerned. You needn't be afraid of my troubling you, although I will confess I would like to take you away from this old duffer of a judge as soon as possible."

She hesitated for a few moments, a thoughtful expression upon her face.

"Reuben," she said at last, "I have always been frank and honest with you no matter how many others I have deceived and I will not attempt to trick you now. You are the only human being in this world for whom I have ever felt one particle of love, but selfishness is so ingrained in my nature that I shrink with horror at the idea of giving up the life of ease and comfort that I now enjoy to again follow your uncertain fortunes.

"Wait, let time pass on. I have already laid by considerable money and now I will put away every cent I can secure, and when I feel I have enough to secure our future then in some other land we may be happy. Will that content you?"

And she gazed anxiously in his face as she put the question.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A DARK SCHEME.

"CERTAINLY," the gambler replied without a moment's hesitation.

"Pray don't think for a moment that I want you to make any sacrifices on my account. I love you too well to ask you to do that.

"Keep on as you are going; get your hands on as much money as possible and I will do the same. Then there's the chance too that the old judge may take his departure to the other world one of these days. He's not a young man, although he seems to be tolerably tough, yet still men of his kidney drop off suddenly and then you'll be a rich widow.

The lip of the woman curled in contempt. "Oh, no!" she exclaimed, "don't run away with any idea of that kind. You don't know my present lord and master.

"He's as tricky as an Indian and doesn't have the least faith in anybody. From the very beginning he gave me to understand that I would not profit in the least by his death; he fixed matters so that it would be to my interest to take good care of his precious self so as to keep him alive as long as possible.

"It was one of our marriage conditions that I was to execute a deed by which I gave up all claim to the judge's estate in the event of his death, in consideration of a certain amount of cash paid to me."

"That was a crafty move on his part."

"Yes, he is a far-sighted schemer and is seldom taken at a disadvantage. But tell me, Reuben, how is that if you did not know I was Mrs. Judge Jones you are here?"

"I am working out one of the details of a big scheme," the gambler replied.

"I don't suppose that I ought to give my partner away, but I'm going to do it all the same. I have been traveling lately with a certain gentleman who stands at the top of the heap in his line and you can judge what kind of a man he must be when I say the name by which he is best known is Curly Kid."

"I have heard of the man," the lady remarked. "Some time ago I read an account of his being up to some mischief. I don't remember exactly what it was, but the police were mixed up in it."

"Yes, whenever Curly Kid's name gets into the newspaper the police generally figure in the account also.

"He's a first-class rascal—a very king among the fraternity; never touches anything, you know, without there's a chance for a big stake at the back of it.

"My luck lately has not been particularly good and so Curly Kid roped me into a speculation with him.

"By accident he happened to drop to Old Lead Pencil's game, learned all the facts regarding your marriage to Crowningshield, the birth of your child, your abandonment of it and flight with the copper king.

"He thought he saw an opportunity for a big stake and after getting me to join him went in for it.

"The first move in the game was to get pos-

session of the boy which he easily accomplished, luring the youngster away with the idea that he was going to see his mother, and in order to cover up his tracks, he got the boy to write a note to his father telling him that he had gone to see his mother."

"Ah, I understand now!" exclaimed Roxanna. "Crowningshield has been here. I tried to deceive him of course, saying that I had a twin sister named Roxanna, who was the girl whom he married, and that after running away from Boston she died in Chicago.

"I took care to fix that matter years ago, so that the records would show that Roxanna Merivale after obtaining a divorce from Howard Crowningshield in one of the courts of that city died there soon afterward."

"A very ingenious tale, but I'm afraid that if I was in Crowningshield's place I would not have swallowed it."

"Neither did he, but speaking for the dead Roxanna, I told him precisely how she had felt toward him and did not hesitate in the least to explain to him how grossly he had been deceived by the woman whom he befriended, trusted and loved."

"That must have been a bitter pill for him to swallow," Raymond observed.

"No doubt it was; but my object in telling him the exact truth was to disgust him, so that he would go away and not trouble me any more, but he showed a revengeful spirit, and declared I had stolen the child away and should be punished."

"Oho; he means war then."

"Yes; and he has begun at once, too. The house has been watched by spies all day long, and the judge's footsteps even have been followed."

The gambler laughed.

"And this is Curly Kid's work," he observed.

"If he had not got after the boy with the idea of pulling a big stake out of either the mother or the father, Crowningshield probably would not have troubled you, after learning the truth in regard to what kind of a woman you were."

"I don't think the abduction of the child makes much difference," Roxanna replied.

"I thought that when I revealed to him frankly what a miserable creature I was as far as he was concerned, he would be so completely disgusted, that he would shrink from giving any publicity to the matter; but, I see now I did not understand the man as well as I thought I did."

"But about this child?" the gambler said.

"Of course now that I see how you feel about the matter, I understand that there isn't any money to be expected from you."

"No, but there is from him!" the woman exclaimed, an angry light flaming in her eyes.

"He thinks the world of the boy. I could see that from the way in which he spoke of him."

"I suppose that all the love he once had for me he transferred to the child, and he loved me as well as any woman would care to be loved, and that was one reason, I suppose, that caused me to hate him. It's a strange contradiction, of course, but that is the way it has always been with me. I didn't care for the man, but circumstances rendered it advisable for me to marry him. I was really led into the match without knowing what I was doing, and after it was over, I blamed myself for having been weak enough to consent.

"I had bound myself to a man who in every respect was as different from me as daylight is from darkness; we had not two ideas in common, yet I played my part so well, that he never suspected that I could not bear him, although he often wondered at my quiet coldness.

"Now then, he looks upon his boy as the apple of his eye; I am sure of that from the way in which he spoke when he came to see me.

"He is rich, or has wealthy relatives from whom he can get money, it is all the same, and I have not the least doubt, if you play your cards right, you can get a good sum out of him for the boy's ransom.

"But you will have to play a careful game, for he believes that I am at the bottom of the matter, and in his present state of mind, I've no doubt that he would jump at any chance to deal me a deadly blow."

"When we touch him for the ransom, though, he ought to understand that you haven't anything to do with the matter."

"Yes, that ought to open his eyes; but still it may not."

For a few moments the woman paused, her head sunk down upon her breast, and her eyes were fixed upon the floor, while a dark, angry look came over her face.

It was plain that her thoughts were not pleasant ones.

Her companion watched her with interest; but as he perceived that she was busy in meditation, he did not interrupt her.

At last Roxanna raised her head and spoke:

"This Curly Kid is a very king of scoundrels, if I rightly comprehend your meaning."

"Yes, he is."

"And you have become his associate?"

"Yes, I have been obliged to go in with him; I have been in hard luck for some time, and as this thing seemed to promise a big stake, without much if any risk, I concluded to take a hand

in it; but outside of that I haven't had any dealings with him, although I have been a sort of a chum of his for about six months now."

"He is in communication, I suppose, with all sorts of desperate and dangerous men?" Roxanna remarked, a peculiar look shining in her eyes.

"Oh, yes, I presume he numbers as many rascals among his acquaintances as any man in Boston."

"Some men, possibly, who for money could be hired to commit almost any bloody deed."

The voice of the woman had sunk almost to a whisper, and she leaned across the little table, a baleful light gleaming in her eyes.

The gambler guessed what was coming, and his voice, too, grew low, and his face dark, when he replied:

"Yes, I know two or three such men," he said. "Reckless scoundrels who, I really believe, would murder their own brother with as little compunction as though the victim was a vagabond dog, provided they were well paid for the deed."

"Suppose this Crowningshield tries to push me to the wall, would I not be justified in fighting for my life?" she asked, with a frown upon her beautiful face, that for the moment made her look far more like a demon than an angel.

"Most certainly you would."

"Let this Curly Kid remain in ignorance of the fact that you and I are old acquaintances; tell him that you have seen me, and I care nothing for the child; that from Crowningshield alone can money be obtained, then you seek out some of these scoundrels, and I will arrange a plot to kidnap Crowningshield."

"Then, when I have him safe, he must either agree to leave me alone, or else he will find me as pitiless as a raging tiger deprived of her young."

A few more words of small importance, and then the gambler departed.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A CONSULTATION.

DESPITE his habitual coolness the gambler's head was in a whirl as he descended the steps of Judge Jones's mansion.

The meeting with the woman, whom for years he had thought dead, and the design which she had revealed to him—her intention to force Crowningshield to give up his idea of bringing her to justice—gave him ample food for thought.

"Things are getting decidedly complicated," he muttered to himself as he slowly strolled down the street.

"First, Curly Kid wants to strike Crowningshield for five or ten thousand dollars on account of the child; he may be able to do it and again he may not; as far as the woman is concerned, his cake is all dough. I shall have to invent some plausible story so that he won't suspect that Mrs. Judge Jones and myself are old acquaintances, for if he discovers that fact, he might think I was not dealing fairly with him."

"Second, Crowningshield must be got at in some way so that he will be compelled to let up on Roxanna."

"To accomplish this will require considerable head-work and I must have time to think it out."

It had been arranged between Randolph and Curly Kid that the latter would wait at a certain saloon on Charles street near the Providence until the former had interviewed the lady.

To this saloon the gambler at once proceeded. Curly Kid was sitting at one of the tables in the rear of the place, smoking a cigar and reading an evening paper when Randolph came in.

The moment the gambler came in, Curly Kid made the cabalistic sign to the German behind the bar which signified "two beers."

The lager was brought, Randolph took a seat at the table, then taking a hearty drink of the amber-colored liquid, the two proceeded to business.

Although a saloon of this kind would seem at the first glance to be a very strange place for an artful dodger like Curly Kid to select in which to discuss such an important matter as the one upon which he and his companions were about to converse yet in reality it was a good idea for the publicity of the place was a defense against eavesdropping.

The saloon depended greatly upon the transient trade attracted by its near proximity to the depot.

About all of its customers rushed in, got a drink and then hurried out, and few tarried to exchange words with the presiding genius behind the bar.

None of the men seemed to have any time to sit down at one of the tables to enjoy their drink, and so the two conspirators were able to converse without fear of being overheard.

"Well, how did she pan out?" asked Curly Kid.

"Not at all."

"Whew! you don't say so? Well, well, that's a pretty bad beginning."

"Yes, about as complete a beat as I ever run into," the gambler remarked.

"She wouldn't have it for a cent. Of course

it was a very delicate subject and I had to handle it in the most gingerly manner."

"Oh, certainly, and that was the reason why I put you onto the job, instead of tackling it myself. I'm no good as far as a woman is concerned," Curly Kid admitted.

"As a general rule I can talk the eyebrows clean off a man, but I never had any luck with women."

"I began by apologizing for my intrusion, trusted when she knew the business upon which I came she would excuse me."

"Then I plunged boldly at once to the point, by remarking that I believed she had been married and divorced, before meeting with her present husband, Judge Jones."

"Well, that was coming right down to business," Curly Kid observed.

"Yes, but she met the bluff like a major."

"Mind you, took the matter perfectly cool—didn't betray the least annoyance, and all she said was that I had been misinformed."

"Judge Jones was her first husband and she had never been married before."

"That was a pretty plump denial."

"Indeed it was and when I expressed my surprise and said I had been informed that some ten years ago she had been married to Mr. Howard Crowningshield and that a child was living the issue of that union, she answered that it was a mistake and that she had been confounded with her twin sister Roxanna."

"Her name was Roselle, but that she had a twin sister, Roxanna, who had married this Mr. Crowningshield and left him after a couple of years, gone to Chicago where she procured a divorce from him and shortly afterward died."

"I see, I see," observed the other, thoughtfully. "She's going to try the twin sister game."

"Naturally I expressed my astonishment and in order to draw the woman out, I asked if the child to whom I refer was still living?"

"And what did she say?" asked Curly Kid, eagerly.

"Oh, she merely shrugged her shoulders, said she really didn't know, and what was more, didn't care."

"Then, perceiving that there wasn't much chance for us, I made a bold push and put the question plainly to her whether she had any interest in the child's welfare or was utterly indifferent to it."

"That was bringing matters to close quarters," Curly Kid remarked.

"She wasn't at all afraid to meet the issue," the gambler replied. "For her answer was prompt and to the point."

"She did not take the slightest interest in the child—would not know it if she saw it and it was no more to her than any beggar's brat running in the street."

"That was decidedly to the point," said Curly Kid making a grimace.

"Yes, she further said that if I had no other business with her except to talk about the child, I was merely wasting my time and she must beg to be excused."

"Of course, after that, there wasn't anything more to be said, and after making due apologies for my intrusion, I came away."

Curly Kid remained silent for a moment, drumming restlessly with his fingers on the table.

"Well, we must go for Crowningshield," he said, at last. "I would rather have the women to deal with, for in such a matter as this a woman is not usually inclined to be as obstinate as a man."

"A man, being pugnacious by nature, is pretty apt to fight when you come to put the screws upon him, but a woman is more inclined to listen to reason, and when you convince her that she is in a tight place, she is generally willing to pay liberally to get out of it if she has plenty of money."

"You can't strike Mrs. Judge Jones this deal, so you will have to deal with Crowningshield," the gambler observed.

"And then there's another point to be considered."

"You have arranged the matter so as to give him the impression that the mother has got away with the child."

"Now, when you come to touch him for a ransom, won't he be inclined to cut up ugly, thinking that the demand comes from her?"

Curly Kid reflected upon the matter for a moment, then he said:

"That point of yours, Randolph, is well put. There isn't the least doubt that he'd fight like a demon if he thought she had anything to do with the matter, so that we must arrange to undeceive him as soon as possible."

"We must explain to him, you know, that this boy business is a little commercial transaction engineered by some gentlemen of leisure, who are possessed of more brains than cash, and that if he values the life of his kid, the quicker he emulates the example of the sharp we read about in the Scriptures, and comes down, the better."

"Will you get at him? by means of an interview?"

"The risky business," the gambler observed, with a wise shake of the head.

"Yes, I know it, and I can tell you, partner, I don't intend to run any risk."

"No interview business in mine, if you please. No, no, that's not the game I'm going to play at all," Curly Kid replied.

"A man of genius like myself, Randolph, you know seldom travels in the old ruts. That is the reason why, when I go into a speculation, I usually manage to come out ahead of the smart detectives who are always on the lookout to trap me."

"And have you thought out a plan to get at Crowningshield, without giving him a chance to put the bloodhounds on your scent?"

"Yes; the idea came to me the instant you spoke about the matter."

"That is where the genius comes in, my boy," Curly Kid remarked, laughingly. "It doesn't take a man of my kidney a week to think out a plan of action."

"On the contrary, the brilliant idea comes in an instant, and in about ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, the scheme that flashed across your brain like the meteor light through the sky, is far better than the one which only comes after hours of hard brain work."

"I'll get the kid to write a letter to his papa stating that he is held in duress, vile, and that a contribution of ten thousand dollars will be required before he will be released, and, as there's danger in delay, suppose we go out to the house at once."

He consulted his watch.

"We have just about time enough to catch a train, so let's be moving."

"All right, I'm with you, the idea is a good one, and the quicker it is worked the better."

Half an hour later the two were in a train hurrying away from Boston, little suspecting that a spy was hot on their track.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A CONSULTATION.

THE iron horse is a wonderful traveler, and it did not take the conspirators many minutes to make the journey from the modern Athens to the little railroad station, which was only a short distance from the old house where Curly Kid had secreted the boy.

The two conspirators were the only passengers who left the train at this station.

Curly Kid took particular care to look around him as he alighted from the cars, saying quietly to his companion:

"Keep your eyes open, partner, for some one may have tumbled to our little game and I don't intend they shall pipe me off if I have anything to say about it."

"Yes, a man can't be too cautious," the gambler observed.

The precaution taken by the two seemed to be a needless one though, for no one else got off the train, and in a few minutes the iron horse was in motion again, and soon disappeared in the distance.

It was a bright, moonlight night, so that all the surrounding objects could be distinctly seen, and the two kept watch of the train until it vanished from their sight.

"All correct!" observed Curly Kid. "I didn't think that there was much danger that any one had got on to our game, but this is a mighty uncertain world, you know, and as the French say, it is the unexpected that is always happening."

"We were the only ones who got off the train, so I guess everything is all right, and I don't really see, too, how it would be possible for any one to get on our track," remarked the other.

By this time the two had left the platform and had started up the road which led from the depot toward the house which they sought.

"Randolph, my boy, you are not so old a hand at this peculiar sort of business as your uncle," said Curly Kid.

"You must remember that I have been a good many years at this sort of thing, and my experience teaches me that sometimes it is impossible to cover your tracks so carefully as to keep the bloodhounds from scenting them out."

"Now in this case to-night. You visited the lady; there may have been some spies prowling around in the neighborhood, for if Crowningshield has been smart enough to give the case into the hands of some good man, the first move in the game would be to put a watch upon the house of the woman, and spy upon every one that comes from it, strangers in particular. The spies would follow you; you would lead them to me, then my footsteps would be tracked, and so the right scent be hit off."

"Yes, it could be done in that way undoubtedly," Randolph observed.

"I'll go bail, though, that you never thought of such a thing until I mentioned it just now."

"You are right there—I did not," the gambler admitted.

"And I presume that after you left the house you never looked about you for the purpose of observing whether there were any spies in the neighborhood or not?"

"Well, no; I did not take any particular notice; but I think, though, if there had been anybody lurking in the neighborhood I should have seen them."

But even as he spoke, back to his mind came

the memory of how his brain had been in a whirl as he left the house where he had so unexpectedly encountered the long-lost Roxanna; and though he did not feel inclined to admit the fact to his companion, yet in his own mind he was satisfied that if there had been any spies in the neighborhood, and they had used reasonable care in concealing themselves, he would not have been apt to see them.

But as he and his companion had not been followed, he came to the conclusion that no harm had come from his absent-minded carelessness.

"When a man has been skulking along in the shadow of the law as long as I have, he gets so he is really afraid almost of his own reflection in the sun."

"It has come to be a second nature for me to look around whenever I am in the street for the purpose of seeing whether there is anybody playing the spy upon me; and it doesn't make any difference whether I am engaged upon a business operation or not. The habit has grown upon me so that I do it constantly."

"Now, I don't suppose you noticed it, but I was on the lookout all the way to the depot."

"No, I did not observe it."

"I don't do it, of course, in such a manner as to give myself away," Curly Kid observed.

"And I had an idea two or three times, from the way some fellows acted who were coming along the street after us, that we were being followed."

"I kept my eyes open after we boarded the train, but they did not come inside of the railing, for I kept watch of the gate, and if any one of them had come through I would have spotted 'em in a moment."

"There were three of them that excited my suspicions, but I guess I was barking up the wrong tree after all."

"Oh, I suppose the idea is that you are apt to be over suspicious at times."

Curly Kid admitted that there wasn't much doubt that this was a fact.

"We're all right now, though," he said, in conclusion. "For if there had been any spies after us, they would have been obliged to have got off the train at the station, and then I would have immediately tumbled to their little game."

"Suppose they had waited until the train started and then jumped off on the opposite side from the depot," the gambler suggested.

"Partner, that was exactly the little dodge I expected them to try," the other responded, "and that was the reason why I staid on the platform and watched the train until she was out of sight."

"Nary man got off of her, for I would have spotted him in an instant if he had. Oh, I'm up to all games of that sort."

And in this satisfactory mood the two walked onward, taking no pains now to look behind them for they felt that they were secure from observation.

But Curly Kid, for once in his life, despite of his good generalship, had been beaten.

The two had been followed.

And the chase had been commenced when the gambler quitted the house of Judge Jones.

Spies had followed him, not one alone but three, and they had tracked him to the saloon where his partner waited for him.

Then after the gambler was fairly domiciled within, one of the spies had taken advantage of a couple of travelers entering to get a drink to march in with them, took a glass of beer at the bar and at the same time observed what the man whom he had tracked so closely was up to.

Dame Fortune in this instance took it into her capricious head to frown upon the master second-drel.

The spy knew who he was, and what an unsavory reputation he bore, and when he joined his two companions without, was able to communicate to them this important bit of information, which, of course, convinced them that they were on the right track.

With the greatest caution then they tracked the two from the saloon to the depot, and guessing from Curly Kid's manner that he was on the watch, they did not attempt to board the train in the usual manner, passing through the gate and exhibiting their tickets to the man who guarded the entrance.

But they got on board of the train all the same though.

They went to the street at the end of the depot and when the train pulled out, going slowly at first of course, each man selected a different car and jumped upon it.

Then the man who was acquainted with the desperado—who had got on the last car, proceeded to "locate" the two who had been so cleverly tracked, by passing through the coaches, entering by the rear door so he was able to discover the men he sought without attracting their attention in any way.

The two were seated in the forward part of the car, and the three spies took up a position in the rear part of the same coach, and when Curly Kid and his companion, upon their station being reached, made their exit from the front door of the car, the three spies hurried out of the rear door, but they did not get off on the side where the platform was, but descended on

the other, hurried down the track a short distance, this movement being concealed by the cars of the train, and concealed themselves behind a little clump of bushes which grew near the bank, stretching out at full length upon the ground.

This movement was so dextrously performed that the master scoundrel, with all his shrewdness, had no suspicion of what had taken place.

And then when the two had started up the road, the watchers waited until they had got a good distance off before they attempted to follow them.

With all the caution of the feather-garnished Indian warrior, following upon the trail of a foe whose scalp-lock he sought to win, the spies tracked the two plotters.

It was an easy matter to follow them and yet keep out of sight, for the sound of their footfalls rung out distinctly on the clear night air.

And when the two came within sight of the old house, the trees which overhung the narrow road gave so much shade that the trackers were able to come so near to the men they were following so closely that they were able to see them enter the old-fashioned mansion.

And then, after holding a brief consultation, the three selected a snug ambush within musket-shot of the house and camped down, apparently having come to the conclusion to make a siege of it.

CHAPTER XXIX.

MOLL'S WARNING.

UPON arriving at the door of the old house Curly Kid did not trouble the ancient brass knocker which ornamented the venerable portal, but pressed his finger upon a certain spot in the frame-work of the door.

Underneath his finger was a metal knob, painted green, though, to correspond with the wood-work, and it was so skillfully contrived that no one would be apt to discover it unless a close examination was made.

This knob communicated with a bell inside, and by this means the inmates of the house had warning of the approach of the master.

In a few moments the door opened and the dark-faced woman, whom in a previous chapter we introduced to the reader, appeared.

After admitting the pair, she closed and carefully locked and bolted the door after them.

The door was evidently arranged with the idea of standing a siege.

In addition to the strong, old-fashioned lock, there were two massive bolts upon the door, and a strong oak box arranged to go across the door, resting in iron sockets.

It would have taken a battering-ram to break in the door thus strongly guarded.

"How's the kid?" asked the master scoundrel, after the woman had secured the door, which she did with the utmost care after the two men had entered.

"All right; he's a bright little fellow, and bears his imprisonment with the calmness of a philosopher," the woman replied. "He's very lonesome, though, and told me to-day that he wished his mamma would hurry up and come, because he was afraid his papa would be anxious about him."

"And in order to quiet him and keep him from fretting, I told him that I shouldn't be surprised if his mamma came to-night."

"There wasn't any use of giving any such ghost story as that to him," remarked Curly Kid, who detected a tone in the woman's voice that did not at all please him.

"What is the use of saying such a thing, when you know very well that the brat's mother ain't going to put in an appearance?" he asked, huskily.

"Curly, I'm going to speak out my mind in regard to this matter, although I suppose you will be terribly angry about it," the woman said, with evident determination. "I don't like this business at all, and I don't believe that it will bring you any luck. If I had my way I'd send the boy home to his folks. If you hold on to him, you will only bring a hornets' nest about your ears, just you take my word for it."

"Now, Moll, you're a pretty smart woman, but you don't know everything," Curly Kid replied, scornfully.

"You can attend to your own business a deuced sight better than you can to mine. I know what I am about, and don't you forget it."

"I'm after a big stake here, and I mean to make it, too; and if you think I'm going to be turned from my way, just because a kid has got a coaxing way with him that appeals to your soft heart, you are deucedly mistaken, that's all I've got to say about it."

"Oh, you will have your own way, of course," the woman said, with an air of resignation. "I know you of old; your will is law, and everybody must bend to it; but just mark my words and remember them, you will rue the day when you embarked upon this enterprise."

"I feel that there is evil in the air. Oh, be warned by me, and have nothing more to do with it in any way, shape or manner."

"Nonsense!" cried the man, contemptuously; "do you really suppose that a man like myself

is to be turned from my path because an old woman's superstition has suddenly seized upon you? Why, I should prove myself to be the biggest donkey that ever lived if I allowed your foolish words to have any weight with me."

"Don't talk any more about the matter, or you will make me angry."

"All right, I'm dumb; I've said all that I am going to say," the woman remarked. "If evil comes of it you will not have any one to blame but yourself. You were warned and you would not heed the warning."

"But your warning doesn't amount to anything. It is only an idle fancy, that is all; you have no tangible grounds to go upon," he replied, impatiently.

"That's very true; it is only my instinct urged me to advise you to give up the scheme. I can give you reasons for it, and so I will not trouble you about the matter again."

"And by so doing you will be acting like a sensible girl," remarked Curly Kid as he proceeded up the stairs.

"It's a big scheme and unless I have terrible bad luck I will make a pile out of it."

He spoke confidently enough and yet for all that he did not feel at ease.

The words of the woman annoyed him, for upon a half-a-dozen occasions he had found that her presentiments were as a general rule extremely accurate.

He did not like her interference and was greatly annoyed at it, and then all of a sudden an idea flashed into his mind that made him still more strongly inclined to resent her words.

"How in the fiend's name did you come to know anything about this matter anyway?" he demanded, abruptly, turning to her.

"How do you know what game I am up to or aught about the youngster at all?"

When the woman first spoke Curly Kid failed to remember that in order the better to keep his secret he had not revealed to her anything about the matter, merely saying that he was going to use the secret chamber and she must be careful to send up the meals regularly.

It was a strange piece of forgetfulness on the part this master scoundrel to allow this circumstance to escape him and he was naturally angry now that he thought of it.

"You didn't confide in me in this matter, did you?" retorted the woman, scornfully.

"I suppose you thought that I couldn't be trusted; I'm a woman and therefore could not be depended upon to hold my tongue."

"Since I have been your servant and like a dog have followed your checkered fortunes I have never given you any proof of my devotion to your interest."

"I could not be trusted with this important secret and so must be kept in the dark."

Curly Kid in spite of his resolute domineering way was in a measure afraid to anger this faithful creature who had for so many years served him faithfully, and then too he blamed himself now for yielding to the caprice which impelled him to endeavor to keep the matter a secret from her.

But one odd thing about this really fiend-like scoundrel was he was always wonderfully quick to perceive and acknowledge when he was in the wrong and now on this occasion understanding that he had blundered badly he hastened to get out of the false position as quickly as possible.

"Well, old girl, don't be angry with me!" he exclaimed. "I acted like a fool, and I don't know what got into me to attempt to keep you in the dark, for if ever a mortal in this world has given proof of trustworthiness you are the person."

"But I say, how did you catch on to the game anyhow?"

"Well, it was just by accident," the woman replied, considerably mollified by Curly Kid's frank avowal.

"You never confided to me the secret of this hidden room and I did not attempt to pry into it, for the reasons that you gave for keeping me in the dark were good."

"If you, or anybody else, were concealed in the apartment and the police made a descent on the house I could swear with an easy conscience that I knew nothing whatever about the matter."

"But just by accident I happened to stumble upon the door and entered the apartment before I knew where I was going."

"Yes, I can understand how that could happen," Curly Kid remarked.

"Of course when I found myself in the presence of the boy and he looked at me with his big, innocent, blue eyes, and exclaimed:

"Oh, I thought you was my mamma," and then proceeded to tell me how a gentleman had taken him away promising to bring him to his mamma and how anxious he was to see her."

"I tell you, Curly Kid, my heart was touched, although it is so long since I have experienced anything of the kind that I had begun to think that I hadn't got any heart, left in my body; but the innocent prattle of the boy reached a tender spot."

"I know that you didn't intend that I should know anything about the matter, and I felt

guilty in questioning the child but I couldn't help it, and of course I easily guessed what game you were up to, but I tell you, Curly, I do not believe the scheme will work."

"Now, Moll, don't run away with the idea that I am going to harm the boy in any way, because that isn't a part of the programme at all," Curly Kid remarked, soothingly.

"I'm only going to try to make a stake out of him."

"I thought I could 'touch' his mother, but the game wouldn't work, and now I'm going for the father."

"No good—no good!" responded the woman with a wise shake of the head.

"Well, we can tell that better after we try, you know," he retorted.

"Anyhow we'll never know until we try, but the boy won't come to any harm, rest assured of that."

Then he turned to Randolph.

"You wait with Moll in the parlor while I get the boy to write a pathetic letter to his dad," he said.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE LETTER.

IN obedience to the instructions, the gambler and the woman entered the old-fashioned parlor, while Curly Kid proceeded up stairs to the secret apartment.

"I wonder if there is anything in Moll's presentiment," he murmured, as he made his way to the top of the house.

Like most men of his peculiar calling, he was rather inclined to be superstitious—a firm believer, at any rate, in good and ill-luck.

As he was wont to remark, when the subject was discussed:

"It's all nonsense for people to say that there isn't any such thing as luck in this world. There is, and the men who make big stakes are lucky men, and the fellows who slip up in it every time are the unlucky ones."

"One job I plan with the greatest care, but everything goes wrong, and I can't work it for a cent; another 'plant' I go at kinder careless, pans out first-rate right from the beginning."

And this argument the man repeated to himself as he proceeded up the stairs.

He was trying to fight off the idea that there was any truth in the woman's presentiments of evil.

"Everything has worked smoothly in this affair from the beginning—gone as well as I could wish. Why, then, should I fear as to the result?"

"Bah! It is a woman's idle fancy, and I am a fool to give the least heed to it."

But, for all this stout assertion, he was decidedly more influenced by her warning than he would have been willing to admit.

He made his way through the secret passage into the hidden apartment.

The moon shone in through the window so that the room was nearly as light as by day.

Little Goldenlocks was lying upon the bed with all his clothes on, and, though Curly Kid made his entrance into the apartment in an almost noiseless manner, yet the child seemed instinctively to understand that there was some one in the room, and awoke from his slumber with a start.

"Don't be alarmed, my little man," said Curly Kid, reassuringly, as he helped himself to a chair.

"It is only your old acquaintance, and you are not afraid of me, I hope?"

"Oh, no, sir," replied Adonis, but there was a solemn expression upon his face and a wistful look in his big, blue eyes as he spoke.

"That's right!" the man exclaimed, encouragingly.

"I'm a friend of yours, and there's no mistake about it, either."

"And my mamma, sir? Where is she, and when will she come to me?" Goldenlocks asked, anxiously.

"I'm afraid that you won't be able to see your mamma at all," Curly Kid replied.

"You see, your mamma is married again now, and this gentleman whom she has married doesn't like little boys, and so she won't be able to send for you, so you'll have to write to your papa to come and get you."

A joyful look appeared upon the face of the child.

"Oh, I'll be so glad to see my papa again!" he exclaimed. "I've been so lonesome without him."

"I'd carry you back myself but I am obliged to go away early to-morrow morning, and then it will be necessary for your papa to come too so as to pay the people of the house here for taking care of you."

"I thought when I brought you here that your mamma would pay the bills and so I told the folks here, but her husband won't allow her to have anything to do with the matter so your papa must come and pay."

"Oh, my papa will do that; papa always has plenty of money, and he'll be so glad to get me home again—for I know he must be dreadfully lonesome without me—that he'll be willing to pay what the people want."

"Have they treated you well here?"

"Yes, sir; I've only seen one lady and she has been real kind to me."

"Well, I guess you had better write a little note to your father, tell him, you know, that you went with a gentleman to see your mamma, but that you wasn't able to see her and you have been stopping here with some people who have been kind to you and treated you well, but you want to come home and for him to please send some money to pay the bills," suggested the man.

"Yes, I will write!" exclaimed the child, grasping eagerly at the idea.

There was a table in the room and in the drawer was pen, ink and paper.

Curly Kid got these out and drawing a chair to the table arranged the boy so he could write his letter.

"Go ahead and compose the letter in your own way," the man said, after all was in readiness.

"I don't doubt you will make a good thing out of it."

The lad wrote quite nicely for a boy of his age and his letter covered the ground admirably.

It ran as follows:

"DEAR PAPA:—I went with a gentleman to see mamma, but after I got to the house where I was to see her, somebody wouldn't let her come, so I want you to please come and bring me home, and please bring some money with you so as to pay the people who have taken care of me.

"I am awful lonesome without you, papa, so please come as quick as you can. The folks have been real kind to me here, but I miss you, papa, and my dear home so much.

"Please give my love to Aunt Letty and Uncle Horace and to everybody in the house, and I shall be so glad to see them all.

"Your loving son,
"ADONIS CROWNINGSHIELD."

Curly Kid read the letter over carefully after the boy had written it and nodded his head in approval.

"That is very nicely written, my little man, and I will see that your papa gets it the first thing in the morning, but it may be a day or two before he can come after you, so you mustn't get impatient."

The boy opened his big blue eyes wide in astonishment when he heard this.

"Oh, you don't know my papa, sir!" he exclaimed. "He'll come right away the moment he knows that I want him."

"Yes, but I understand that he has been called out of town on some important business," the man replied, perceiving that it was necessary to get out of the difficulty in some way.

"I had forgotten that when I said I would see that he got your letter the first thing in the morning, but I will have it sent after him, and I've no doubt he will hurry back as soon as possible, but his business may detain him for a day or two, and so you mustn't worry if he doesn't come right away.

"Your letter will let him know that you are all right, and so he will not be alarmed."

This was a plausible tale, and the boy was satisfied.

"Please send him word, though, to come as quickly as he can," said the child.

"Of course; don't you worry about that. I will tell him that you are in a great hurry, and very anxious to get home.

"But make yourself comfortable now; undress and go to bed like a good boy, and above all, don't fret, for your papa will come as soon as he can."

And then, with really tender care, this wily, unscrupulous desperado assisted the child to prepare for bed, assisted him into the couch, and tucked the clothes in around him as dexterously as though he had been the father of a family, and accustomed to looking after "olive-branches" for years.

After the child was safely bestowed in bed, he bid him good-night, and left the apartment.

"I don't wonder that he made an impression upon the heart of Moll," Curly Kid muttered as he made his way down-stairs.

"He's a brave little fellow, and has the making of a fine man in him, and though I hope by his aid to make a big stake out of his father, yet if I don't succeed, not a hair of the boy's head shall be harmed.

"I don't believe that I would have any luck if I attempted to harm that child."

With this impression strong in his mind, he joined Randolph and Moll in the parlor.

"It's all right; I've got the document I wanted," he said, "and it is about as nice a little letter as I ever run across. Just listen to it."

And then he read the boy's letter aloud.

"He's a bright little fellow to be able to write such a letter as that," the gambler commented.

"Oh, yes, he's a lovable little fellow," the woman remarked, "and I wouldn't have anything happen to him while he was under my roof for the world."

"Don't you be alarmed; I don't intend that any evil shall come to him, but if I can use the boy as a lever to work five or six thousand dollars out of his dad, I'll be that much better off and the boy will be none the worse for it."

"His father has money enough and can easily

spare the amount. This letter will be sure to fetch it, I think.

"Now, I must devise some means by which the transfer of the money into my hands and the boy into his, can be effected, without danger of the police getting onto the racket and busting the whole thing up."

"That will require some thought," Randolph suggested.

"Yes, but I'm able for it, as an Irishman would say. I'll think it out as we walk to the station. There's an owl-train makes a stop at the Crossing somewhere around twelve and we've got plenty of time to catch it. Take care of yourself, Moll, and don't worry about the boy."

And then the two departed.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A SURPRISE.

THE two men emerged from the house and then Moll closed and bolted the door behind them.

"This is really a great scheme," Curly Kid remarked as he and his companion made their way to the gate through the front garden.

"Well, I hope it will work," remarked Randolph, who was not at all sanguine about the matter.

He hadn't any experience at this sort of business and to his mind the danger of detection before the money could be gotten at seemed great.

"Oh, I'll fix it so it will work!" exclaimed the other confidently.

"Here's the strong point in all matters of this kind; we work on the fears of the parent."

"I have your boy, you have a certain sum of money, I propose to exchange the boy for that sum and you had better be quick about it if you want to ever see your child again."

"Now if a man has plenty of money—plenty so that he won't miss the sum that is demanded, do you suppose he is going to hesitate when he thinks the life of his child is at stake?"

"Well, no, I should think not."

"Take the matter home to yourself—would you not yield to such a demand under the circumstances?"

"Yes, I think I should, but then some men would be apt to get ugly and show fight; prefer, you know, to pay the money to the detectives to recover the child rather than to the kidnappers as ransom."

"Very true, some men are bull-headed," Curly Kid remarked. "Some men would always rather fight than compromise, but when the life of this child is at stake, the man must be obstinate indeed who dares to adopt a course likely to bring harm to the little one."

"It's a bold game, I know, but to my thinking the chances are a hundred to one that we will take the trick and collar about five thousand dollars of Crowningshield's money."

By this time the two had passed through the gate, and gained the road.

"Yes, yes," continued Curly Kid, as they walked along, "it is about as sure as anything can be in this mighty uncertain world."

"Well, I hope we'll succeed, for I need some money bad enough," the gambler remarked.

"My pockets are about empty, too," rejoined the other.

"But then that's nothing wonderful. I'm such an extravagant dog. I ought to have been a millionaire, for I was born with a taste for all sorts of luxuries."

"Throw up your hands!"

Stern were the accents in which the command was given, and the three spies, who had so closely tracked the confederates from the city to this retired spot, rising from the bushes by the roadside, where they had lain concealed, with cocked and leveled revolvers, gave due emphasis to the words.

Never in this world were two men more completely surprised.

They had not the least idea that there was a soul anywhere in the neighborhood, until the three men rose like phantoms from the bushes.

Both Curly Kid and the gambler were armed, trusty six-shooters reposed in their pistol-pockets, but their adversaries had "the drop" on them in a way they despised.

The spies were plainly dressed in dark clothes, so that they would not be apt to excite attention anywhere, by reason of being too well or too poorly attired.

They were well-built, muscular men, with firm, resolute countenances, and from the way their eyes glanced along the shining tubes of the revolvers, it was plain they "meant business," to use the old expression.

The three are old acquaintances of our readers, being no other than Howard Crowningshield and his two friends—the chums of bygone days—Gordon Endicott and Washington Winslow.

Curly Kid recognized Crowningshield, knowing him by sight, although not in any other way acquainted with him, but the other two were strangers to him, and he took them to be detectives.

Randolph, not knowing any of them, came to the conclusion that they were all bloodhounds, and he cursed the unlucky chance which had

brought this evil stroke of fortune down upon his head.

For a moment after the command to "throw up their hands" was given, the two parties stood still and glared at each other.

As we have said, both Curly Kid and the gambler were well armed, and if they could have got at their weapons, most surely would have made a desperate fight.

But handicapped by such a surprise, to pull their revolvers forth from their abiding-places, without being shot on the instant, was an impossibility.

Both saw that they were in an extremely tight place, and for the life of them could not comprehend how they were going to get out of it.

They put a bold face on the matter, though, raised their hands slowly and clasped them around the back of their necks, Curly Kid striking the key-note by exclaiming:

"Well, gentlemen, I guess you have really got us at a disadvantage this time; but I assure you, you won't make much by going for us."

"I reckon that both of us will not pan out over ten dollars to the pair, and our watches are snide, our jewelry ditto."

He pretended to mistake the three for foot-pads.

The gambler was quick to follow the lead of his companion.

"My partner is giving it to you as straight as a string, gentlemen," he remarked.

"You have had the misfortune to run across two sharps in hard luck, and the plunder that you secure from us will not make any one of you rich."

"Snap on the handcuffs," said Crowningshield, advancing a couple of steps, not at all deceived by the game of the confederates.

"Handcuffs!" exclaimed Curly Kid, allowing his hands to drop toward his pockets, as if by accident.

Crowningshield's keen eyes were on him, though.

"Keep your hands up, or I'll put a ball through your brain," he warned.

The desperado set his teeth firmly together, and a long, hard-drawn breath came from between them, but he did not dare to disobey the command, though, for there was a look in the eyes of Crowningshield which convinced the master scoundrel that the young man would not hesitate to make good his word if provoked to it.

Up went Curly Kid's hands again, a demon-like rage in his heart. If he had had only half a chance, he would have jumped at Crowningshield like a tiger and torn him limb from limb.

Endicott produced a couple of pairs of handcuffs and snapped them on the wrists of the conspirators in short order.

They would have resisted this movement had they not comprehended that they were completely in the power of their captors.

"Well, upon my life! I must say this is the richest joke of the season!" Curly Kid exclaimed, forcing a laugh, which, however, had very little merriment in it.

"This is the first time that I ever heard of a highwayman handcuffing his victims."

"Yes, it is a rather novel idea," echoed the gambler, who was completely disgusted at the turn that affairs had taken, and wished he was well out of the scrape.

"You know well enough who we are, I guess, and this pretended ignorance will not do you any good," Crowningshield remarked.

"Well, you may know all about it," Curly Kid replied, flippantly, "but I'll be hanged if we do."

"You are in the hands of the law."

"The law!" cried the other, pretending to be amazed.

"Yes, in the hands of the law," Crowningshield repeated.

"Oh, come now, you're joking."

"No, no, you will not find it any joke, Mr. Kid," said Endicott.

A dark frown disfigured the face of the desperado as he listened to this speech which revealed to him the fact that he was known to his captors, a thing which he had not suspected.

"I really don't know what you mean by addressing me by any such peculiar appellation," he remarked to Endicott.

"Haven't you made some mistake?"

"I guess not."

"That isn't my name."

"Yes it is."

"Well, you're a kind of a positive rooster, ain't you?" Curly Kid exclaimed, insolently.

"And, if I may be so bold as to ask, who may you be, anyway?"

"My name is Endicott, Gordon Endicott, and I am a lawyer. I had the pleasure once of sitting in the Tombs police court in New York while you were on trial for your life for murder."

"You managed to squeeze out of the scrape that time instead of being hung as you richly deserved, but your time will come."

"It's a lie!" cried the other fiercely. "I'm not the man you take me for at all!"

"Yes, you are; I can swear to it; and be-

sides there's dozens here in the city who can easily identify you."

"It's a lie, I tell you!" Curly Kid repeated, his rage unbounded upon finding that he was recognized, and he bitterly repented that he allowed himself to be handcuffed and regretted he had not made a struggle for freedom even though he risked instant death.

"Oh, you are the man, surely enough," Crowningshield observed. "There isn't any mistake about it and I think this time you will not escape the State Prison, although you did cheat the gallows."

"What have I done?"

"Abducted my boy—where is he?"

CHAPTER XXXII.

STORMING THE FORTRESS.

"THIS accusation is ridiculous. I don't know anything about your boy."

"Oh, yes you do," Crowningshield replied.

"There isn't the least bit of use for you to attempt to lie out of it."

"The best thing you can do is to make a full and frank confession and throw yourself upon my mercy."

"Your mercy? ha, ha, ha!" and the desperado laughed scornfully as though there was something absurd in the idea.

"Yes, you will fare better than if you attempt to deceive me."

"Well, I'm not so sure of that!" Curly Kid retorted, defiantly.

"You will find you will gain more by such a course than by pursuing any other."

"Oh, this is an outrage!" the desperado cried.

"You have no right to put handcuffs upon me. Why, I don't believe you have even got a warrant for my arrest."

"You are quite right. I haven't," Crowningshield remarked, quietly.

"By Heaven! I'll make you sweat for this then."

"Perhaps you will and perhaps you won't," the other retorted. "There is likely to be some doubt about that, but there won't be any doubt about your going to the State prison for a long term of years just as soon as the machinery of the law can send you there."

"You don't seem to understand, my man, that we have got a pretty strong case against you," Endicott remarked after Crowningshield had finished.

"This gentleman's boy has been kidnapped under pretense of taking him to see his mother."

"The house of that mother has been constantly watched ever since the absence of the boy was discovered."

"This friend of yours came from there to-night, met you in a saloon near the Providence depot, and you held quite a confab there together. Then you took the train and came out here, and we followed you like your shadow."

"You went into the house and we waited to give you a warm reception when you came out, which I think we have managed to do."

"It isn't of any use for you to deny the thing, you know, for you and your companion were discussing the matter as you walked along."

"A very foolish trick, by the way, and I wonder that a man as skillful and cunning as yourself should make so terrible a blunder, as to discuss such important business in so open a manner."

"Of course you didn't dream that at such an hour of the night as this any one would be within earshot, but then you were stupid to take any such chance; a wise man wouldn't do it."

Curly Kid glared at the speaker for a moment as though he would like to strangle him, but then sober second thought came to his aid, and he saw that there wasn't anything to be gained by allowing his temper to run away with him.

"Well, I must admit that you have worked the trick pretty well; but I say, suppose I make a clean breast of it, what will you do for me?"

"Oh, well, I don't know; we mustn't make any rash promises you know," the lawyer replied evasively.

"Can you give any information which will bring home the guilt of this outrage to the woman who instigated it?" Crowningshield asked.

The desperado fancied that he perceived a loophole for escape in this speech.

"Well, I don't exactly know about that," he replied, slowly, as if he was deliberating over the matter.

But Randolph quickly put a stop to this. He guessed that Curly Kid in order to save himself might be induced to swear that Roxanna had something to do with it and he was determined that no scandal should attach itself to her if he had any say in the matter.

"What's the use of lying about the thing?" he cried. "I'm the man who saw the woman to whom you refer, and I'm ready to swear under oath that she knows nothing at all about the matter, and so far I haven't seen you produce any proof that we do either. Talk isn't proof, you know."

"How about the conversation between you and your partner here, as you came from the house?" the lawyer asked.

"You misunderstood what we said!" declared the gambler.

"Search the two," suggested the doctor. "We may find something which will give us a clew upon their persons."

"Don't you dare to lay your hands upon me!" cried Curly Kid, indignantly.

The boy's letter was in his breast-pocket, and he knew that if he was searched it would surely be discovered.

But the search was made despite his struggles and curses, and as he had anticipated, the letter came to light.

With trembling hands the father perused the touching little note.

"He is alive and well, thank Heaven!" he exclaimed, when he had finished the reading of the letter, and then he read the note aloud, while his companions listened with eagerness.

"The letter is freshly written!" exclaimed the lawyer; "the boy must be near at hand."

And then, intuitively, the three looked toward the house.

"My boy is there, is he not?" Crowningshield asked, addressing Curly Kid.

"I'll never tell you!" the desperado answered defiantly.

"Oh, yes, not a doubt of it!" the lawyer exclaimed.

"And this letter explains why these two fellows came out here to-night. It was to get this document so as to use it upon you."

"Come, that's the truth now, Curly, isn't it?" he added, addressing the master scoundrel.

"I don't know anything about it; you won't get any information out of me unless you want to make a bargain with me," Curly Kid replied.

"If you want to be reasonable, now, and will agree to hold me blameless for any share that I may have had in this matter, I will hunt in a certain locality in Boston, and I've no doubt I shall be able to find the youngster."

"Oh, I guess we'll find him without having to take the trouble to go all the way to Boston for him," said Endicott.

"Winslow, if you will guard this precious pair, Crowningshield and I will go through the house."

"All right," replied the doctor, "I'll take care of 'em."

"And if they attempt to escape give them a dose of leaden pills."

"Never fear; they will not get away from me."

Then Endicott and Crowningshield hurried away toward the house, leaving the prisoners in charge of the doctor.

"They will have a lively time in getting into the house," Curly Kid observed, grimly, after the two had departed.

"Oh, I guess they'll get in; they have a very persuasive way with them."

"Moll will give them a warm reception when she discovers who they are," the desperado remarked, with a chuckle.

"If they try to force their way into the house and the woman shoots either one or both of them, as she will be apt to do, for she is a regular tiger-cat when she gets going, any jury would be certain to bring in a verdict of justifiable homicide."

But neither of the two who had gone to the house had any intention of going to work in the manner anticipated by Curly Kid.

When the confederates had entered the house the spies were near enough to observe their motions, and the lawyer, who had eyes almost as sharp as a hawk, had noticed that the master scoundrel did not attempt to touch the ancient knocker, but ran his hand up on the framework by the side of the door.

On the way through the garden Endicott explained his ideas in regard to this matter.

He had hit upon the truth, for he suspected there was a secret spring there which communicated with a bell inside of the house.

It did not take the lawyer long to discover the secret knob.

The bell within was rung and the woman came hurrying to the door, thinking that it was the conspirators returned.

And the moment she opened the door the lawyer, all prepared, was quick to act.

He sprang in, pushed the woman back, and before she recovered from her surprise he had dexterously sprung a pair of handcuffs upon her wrists.

There, there, don't attempt to make any fuss, now!" he exclaimed. "You are in the hands of the law."

"Curly Kid and his pal are captured, and they will be lucky if they get off with less than ten years in State prison for this job!"

"Oh, I had a presentiment that this would bring ruin to all of us," mourned the woman, who never for an instant suspected that the lawyer was not a police detective.

"And now, where is the boy?" Endicott inquired, briskly.

"I hope, for your sake, that he is alive and well, for I tell you, frankly, that if anything has happened to him it will go hard with you."

"Oh, don't be alarmed about that, sir, the little fellow is all right. I took care of him as carefully as though he had been my own," she replied.

"I don't believe in this thing, and didn't know

anything about it until he was in the house, but I'll take you to him."

A few moments later Little Goldenlocks was in his father's arms.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

ON THE ROAD.

THE meeting between the father and son was a joyful one and great was the relief to the anxious heart of the father when he found that his boy had not suffered any material damage by his detention.

Thank heaven that you have not been harmed by the villains," Crowningshield exclaimed after the party had descended to the lower part of the house.

The woman was sullen and angry, although she did not yet understand the full extent of the blow which had fallen.

She realized that the desperate scheme of Curly Kid had come to naught, but had no suspicion that both of his confederates were in the hands of the law.

"Oh, no, papa, they have taken good care of me. This lady has been very kind," and the honest little fellow looked gratefully at the stern-faced woman, who despite the years that she had been associated with rascals of various degrees, and her rough, forbidding exterior, still had a motherly heart within her bosom, probably on the same idea that the roughest shelled nut sometimes contains the richest kernel.

"Madam, despite the associations among which I find you I am really grateful to you for your kindness to my son."

"Yes, papa, she told me that I couldn't go out and that she was sorry, but the gentleman who left me in her care was afraid if I went out that I might get hurt, and so I must be content to stay in the house for a while."

"She said it was a pity that she didn't have any toys such as little boys liked to play with, but she would bring me all the things she could think of that were in the house that would be likely to amuse me."

"And I didn't really have such a real bad time, papa, although I was dreadfully lonesome, though the lady was kind enough to come and sit with me nearly all day so as to keep me company."

"Madam, again I thank you for your kindness, and I must say that I am really astonished that a woman who has shown she possessed true motherly feelings should be induced to take part in any such plot as this."

"Well, I don't suppose it will do me much good to say anything in defense of my conduct considering the circumstances under which you found me," she replied, slowly, evidently touched by Crowningshield's kindly manner.

"I will say this much though—perhaps you won't believe me but it is the truth."

"I knew absolutely nothing about the matter until the boy was in the house, and then when I discovered the nature of the plot I warned the man who contrived it that it wouldn't bring him any luck and that if he was wise he'd give it up. Of course he was too old a gamester to pay any attention to the babblings of a foolish woman and the result is, I suppose, I will have to pay the penalty of five or more years in the State prison for being mixed up in the matter."

"Of course I presume if I was willing to give the snap away and turn state's evidence, you would be willing to let up on me a little, but that is something I never yet was guilty of doing."

"I can hold my tongue if I am a woman and as far as I am concerned wild horses could not tear from me the name of the man who worked this job."

"Your fidelity will not be tested, for both of your confederates are in our hands," the lawyer remarked.

"Both captured!" exclaimed the woman, half stunned for a moment by this unexpected intelligence.

"Yes, they are in the road outside of the house and if they are willing to bear witness that you have told the truth in this matter—in my own mind there isn't the least doubt that you have—you shall go free, as a slight testimonial of my appreciation of your kindness to my boy."

"I'm very much obliged to you, sir," the woman replied, evidently touched by this kind offer.

"I supposed I ought to have refused to have anything to do with the matter when I saw what kind of a game was afoot, but then in this life we are not always free agents, you know."

"Very true; but come outside and I will question the men."

The woman had been careful not to mention names for she did not feel certain that the truth had been told her.

It was an old detective dodge to pretend that everything was known and that certain important parties had been captured in order to induce the prisoner who was in their hands to "give away the snap" and betray his pal.

When the party reached the front gate though and she beheld Curly Kid and the gambler handcuffed and guarded by the young doctor with drawn revolver, she saw that her captors had not attempted to deceive her.

"Well, well, we're all in a bad box, arn't we?" Curly Kid exclaimed as the others came up and he saw that the boy had been found and also noticed the "bracelets" which "ornamented" the wrists of the woman.

"Well, we can't keno ever time, as I've often heard you say. We must give the banker some chance to live," Moll responded in the most philosophical manner possible.

"No word of reproach from you, eh?" Curly Kid observed.

"Well, gentlemen, now I want to say a few words about this woman's share in the matter.

"You've got me dead to rights and I'm man enough to stand up and take my medicine like a major. But as far as this woman is concerned, she is perfectly innocent of having anything to do with the abduction of the boy, and in fact didn't know that the child was in the house until some hours after he was put there.

"Her womanly curiosity led her into mischief. She was anxious to see who was concealed in the secret chamber at the top of the house and so discovered the boy.

"Of course when this discovery was made she immediately understood what kind of a game I was up to, and I must do her the justice to say that she protested against it in the most vigorous manner, saying that she was satisfied that nothing but evil would come of it.

"But I was always a headstrong rascal, and so I went on at my own gait.

"She was right, I was wrong, and I suppose I will get five or ten years in the State prison so as to afford me time to repent of my stupidity."

"Be so kind as to remove the handcuffs from her wrists, Endicott," said Crowningshield.

"You pitied my poor boy in his lonesome captivity, and did what you could to brighten his weary hours, and in payment of the service I release you. You are free."

"Thank you, sir," replied the woman, gratefully, as the lawyer removed the handcuffs.

"It won't do you any harm to save me from jail, and perhaps some of these days you may need a favor, and if so, Heaven will surely remember this act of mercy and raise up a friend to serve you."

"Don't preach, Moll, it ain't in your line," Curly Kid remarked, contemptuously.

"Although I don't doubt that every word she says is true enough, though.

"Sometimes it really appears to me as if there was a recording angel somewhere, who is keeping an account of these little things.

"I say, Crowningshield, you couldn't strain a point and let me slide too, could you?" remarked the desperado, with a sarcastic smile, for he had not the slightest hope of any such clemency being extended to him.

"In your case the law must take its course; to pardon you would be but to let forth a human tiger, whose sole mission is to prey upon its fellow-man."

"Well, your head's about level there, and no mistake," Curly Kid replied, scornfully.

"I am an outcast—a pirate, a modern Ishmaelite, whose hand is against every man.

"That's the game I've been playing for years, and it's too late now to start in on a fresh deal."

"It is never too late to reform," returned Crowningshield.

"While the lamp holds out to burn the vilest sinner may return, eh?" quoth Curly Kid, in contempt. "That's good old Scriptural doctrine, but I don't take any stock in it.

"You'll come and see me, Moll, if I'm not lucky enough to get out of this, and have to seek seclusion for a few years."

"You know very well, Curly, that I will stick to you while life remains," she answered, warmly.

"Oh, you're a trump!"

"Let me see," observed Endicott; "how are we going to get our prisoners into the city? Have you got such a thing as a horse and wagon on the premises?" he asked, turning to Curly Kid.

"Say, don't you think it is rather a cheeky thing, asking a man to find his own vehicle to carry him to prison?" asked the master scoundrel.

"Will not that plan be better than to compel you to walk?" the other retorted.

"Well, I don't know but what there is a good deal of truth in that," the desperado admitted.

"There's a horse and a small express wagon in the barn, and they are at your service if you will see that they are returned after you get through with them, because Moll here will want them to work the place. You see, we do a little in the truck line."

"I will attend to that," the lawyer promised.

The woman produced the keys of the barn, Endicott went after the rig, and in a short time returned with a rather vicious-looking sorrel horse hitched to a light express wagon.

There was the usual front seat, and the lawyer had put a couple of old shoe-boxes which he had discovered in the barn, in the rear part of the wagon to serve for seats.

Winslow volunteered to drive, the prisoners were put in the middle of the wagon, while Crowningshield and the lawyer occupied the rear box.

"Take care of yourself, Moll!" exclaimed Curly Kid, as they drove off.

"Keep a stiff upper lip; this is a bad scrape, but I've been in worse in my time, and managed to get out of it."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE ESCAPE.

AWAY went the express wagon, the woman waving her hand in a parting salutation until they were out of sight, and then with a sad heart she returned to the house.

Leaving the woman to her lonely meditations, we will follow the prisoners and their captors.

"Which is the nearest way to the city?" Winslow inquired, not being familiar with the locality.

"Keep straight on in this road which crosses the Charles river and enters Cambridgeport; that is the most direct way and the best road."

"All right."

At this point, the gambler felt Curly Kid nudge him with his elbow, and he understood that this was a signal for him to pay attention to what was coming.

"I don't know though, but what it is bad advice for you—that I'm giving," the master-scoundrel observed, in a reflective sort of way.

"How so?" Winslow asked.

"Why, because my pal here and myself are two of the best divers in the country, and when we come to the river, if you don't keep an eye upon us, we'll be apt to take a header into the stream from the draw, and then you would have to whistle for your prisoners."

"Oh, that's a likely story!" exclaimed the doctor, while the others exchanged smiles.

"You or any other man would be able to swim in the most magnificent manner with those bracelets on your wrists," Winslow continued.

"You would be apt to swim to the bottom pretty quickly," the lawyer remarked.

Crowningshield paid but little heed to the conversation. He was drawing Little Goldenlocks closer to his side.

The boy had been placed on the rear box between his father and the lawyer.

"Oh, but you ain't reckoning on the fact that we are champion swimmers!" Curly Kid exclaimed in a spirit of badinage.

"It would really do your heart good to see myself and my pal here come some of our tricks in the water."

"We had it on the cards once to swim the rapids below the Falls of Niagara, but we could not fix it so that a big enough stake would be offered to pay us for the risk, and so we gave it up."

"You were wise," Winslow observed.

None of the three believed that there was any truth in the man's words, but thought he was indulging in the pleasant pastime known as chaffing.

But it was the truth.

Both of the men were superb swimmers—almost equal to professionals who make a living by exhibitions of their skill in performing all sorts of tricks in the water.

The gambler, of course, being fully aware of this, knew when Curly Kid began to speak about the matter, that there was some deep purpose concealed in the apparently playful remarks.

The secret nudge which he had received from his companion had warned him to be on his guard.

He fully understood what game his companion intended to play.

When the bridge was reached, he calculated in some way to get out of the wagon and leap from the structure into the water.

Swimmers as expert as they were could easily make their way through the water, even though laboring under the disadvantage of wearing handcuffs, and as the street at this point was quite wide, and the banks only sedgy marsh, if they once succeeded in getting into the water they had a pretty good prospect of being able to make their escape.

Just exactly how the daring and desperate Curly Kid intended to get out of the wagon, seated as he was in the midst of his guards, so as to make the leap from the bridge into the stream, was a mystery.

He evidently had some scheme in his head which he believed could be carried out, or else he would never have broached the subject.

Situated as they were, with the State prison staring them in the face, with the almost certain prospect of being condemned there for the term of at least five years—the chances being good that they were far more likely to get ten years than five—any method of escaping from the doom to this living tomb, even at the risk of life, would be gladly seized upon.

No further conversation took place between the parties until the bridge was reached.

Then, as the horse's hoofs clattered upon the wooden way, the gambler again received the warning nudge from his companion.

"Here's the bridge—get ready for your leap!" suggested Winslow jokingly, as they entered upon the structure.

"Stop the wagon, and give me a show for my money!" was the rejoinder.

Winslow did not reply, because the horse at this moment began to give him trouble.

The animal was a vicious, unruly beast, as full of tricks as a pet deer.

The doctor was not a good driver, and the horse had sense enough to understand that he was being driven by a stranger, and by one who was not well enough acquainted with his tricks to understand that it was not safe to drive him with a loose rein.

He had behaved tolerably well on the road, only betraying an inclination to shy once in a while at some real or imaginary object, followed by a sudden bolt as though he meditated upsetting the wagon into the first convenient ditch.

But the moment he got on the bridge, the beast laid his ears back, and began to act as if Old Nick had got into him.

He pranced and he cavorted, danced first to one side and then to the other, as though he was in mortal fear.

"Go along with you! what are you about?" the driver cried.

The auspicious moment had arrived. The two on the back seat were so occupied in watching the eccentric movements of the horse, that they were not paying any particular attention to the prisoners.

The three friends were not trained detectives, who had learned by sad experience the important truth, that it is never safe to trust any of these old and hardened criminals, although they seemed to have given up all idea of attempting to escape.

Their revolvers were bestowed in their pockets.

In truth, it did not seem necessary for these well-built, muscular men to keep weapons in their hands to guard two criminals securely handcuffed.

The further the horse got on the bridge, the worse he seemed to behave.

"Oh, if I only had a whip wouldn't I lay it on this brute!" the driver exclaimed in anger.

Again the gambler felt the nudge of his companion's elbow, and from the energetic manner in which it was given, Randolph guessed that Curly Kid wished him to understand that the decisive moment had arrived.

Suddenly, without a moment's warning, the master scoundrel gave vent to a yell that would have done honor to the wildest red-skin that ever roamed the border.

The effect on the horse was electrical.

The brute took the bit in his teeth, and darted forward at break-neck speed.

The effect of this movement, was that all within the wagon, with the exception of Winslow, who clung to the lines with desperate energy, were upset, and went pell-mell out of the vehicle onto the bridge.

Crowningshield was so occupied in endeavoring to save Little Goldenlocks from being bruised, that he never gave a thought to the prisoners, and the lawyer, having landed on the broad of his back and bumped his head against the hard boards in such a forcible fashion, as to cause a multitude of stars to dance before his vision, was in no condition to look after them.

The two pals being in a measure prepared for just such an event, escaped with only a few lumps.

They were on their feet in an instant, ran to the railing, and then with a shout of triumph, leaped over it into the dark waters below.

The tide was running out, hurrying seaward with the velocity of a mill-race.

And by the time that Crowningshield and Endicott got upon their feet and ran to the railing, the two pals had vanished in the gloom which hung upon the surface of the tide.

"By Jove!" Endicott cried, "that was about as plucky a deed as I ever witnessed!"

"Yes, it was indeed; no one can say a word against the bravery of these two men."

"Do you think they will succeed in making their escape, handcuffed as they are?"

"They are taking a great risk of course, but if they are expert swimmers, which I do not doubt, they ought to be able to get to the land."

"We might recapture them if we followed down the banks," Endicott suggested, all the instinct of the man-hunter aroused.

"There is very little chance of that, the banks are low and wet, nothing but a marsh, all cut up by little gullies flowing into the stream at right angles, so if we should attempt to follow the streams down the banks, the first thing we knew we should find ourselves up to our necks in mud."

"That would be a pleasant experience in such a night as this particularly, for since the clouds have come up the moon is obscured two thirds of the time."

"What is to be done—let the fellows go, and like ancient honest Dogberry, 'thank Heaven that we are rid of a pair of knaves!'"

"Yes, after all what does it matter? I have recovered my boy, and that is all I care for," Crowningshield answered.

"Let us hasten on then, and see what has become of Winslow."

They proceeded over the bridge, and after they had gone for about half a mile on the Cambridge side, they met that gentleman returning with the horse and wagon, having succeeded in at last taming the brute; then they got on board again and started for the city.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE COMPACT.

AND now we must follow the fortunes of the fugitives who had made so bold a dash for liberty.

As the two sprung over the railing, Curly Kid cried hurriedly in the gambler's ear: "Make for a spile under the bridge, and cling to it!"

And this was the method of proceeding that both employed; the moment they rose to the surface of the water, after taking the leap, they swam under the projecting pier near which they had entered the water, and resting their hands upon one of the cross-pieces, which at this stage of the tide was just about level with the water, were completely concealed from view.

The conversation of the two friends as they leaned over the railing and gazed down upon the tide, came distinctly to their ears, but neither of the confederates spoke a word until the sound of the footsteps died away on the bridge.

"They are gone," Randolph observed.

"Yes, and there isn't any danger of their troubling us for the present at any rate, but that Crowningshield is an ugly man to have after you.

"He's got a great deal of the bull-dog in him, and though to-night happy in having recovered his child he is not thinking of pursuing us, yet he is just the kind of man to get up to-morrow morning and put half a dozen bloodhounds upon our track.

"One of the sticklers for justice you know like the old Roman who sacrificed his son, not because he loved his son less but Rome more."

"Are you hungry for a chance to get even with him?"

"I am."

"I can put you in the way of doing that job and getting well paid for doing it too."

"That is what I want. I am never so happy as when I can combine business and pleasure."

"Isn't it safe to make the shore now?"

"Yes, and we had better go direct to the house after so doing, for no one will be likely to trouble us for an hour or two, and inside of that time we can have these cursed steel bracelets filed off."

"So-long then!"

Away the two went, gained the shore without trouble and made their way at their best speed to the old mansion where Moll gladly received them.

The file was brought and in short order they were relieved of the unpleasant ornaments which had decorated their wrists.

The house contained a complete collection of disguises; these were hunted over and when a half an hour later the two men quitted the old house their most intimate friends would never have recognized them.

Curly Kid was got up as an Irishman, and the disguise was perfect, while the gambler appeared as a low-down cockney Englishman, one of the 'Arry stamp.

They made their way to the city along the railroad track, and as they walked they discussed plans for the future, Randolph explaining matters to his companion.

"This Mrs. Judge Jones fairly hates the sight of Crowningshield and I've got an idea from what she said the other day that she would be willing to give a good round sum to cripple him in such a way that he will never be able to annoy her again."

"Do you think she is the mother of the child?"

"I do."

"So do I. I don't take any stock in the yarn about the twin sisters. This woman is Roxanna Merivale, the former wife of Crowningshield and the mother of the child.

"Crowningshield knows it too, I guess; he'll be apt to make it hot for her and that is why she is anxious to silence him in some way.

"I feel sure from the conversation that I had with her that if I could go and say I know a man who hates this Crowningshield and will be glad to do anything to injure him and for a certain sum of money will undertake to put him in your power, I am certain she will jump at the offer."

"Make it then as soon as possible."

"How can I get at her without exciting suspicion? Crowningshield probably has a watch set upon her.

"It was his spies that brought us to grief."

Curly Kid thought the matter over for a moment and then his ready wit struck out a plan.

"I've got a *coupe* and a horse at one of the up-town stables. I'll get them.

"Then you must write a carefully-guarded letter to her saying that if she wishes to talk with you upon the subject that was mentioned when you came to see her in reference to the child, if she will go to the corner of Beacon street and Charles this evening at eight o'clock, a *coupe* will be there. She can enter, I'll drive you out over the mill-dam and up into the Roxbury district and I will double and turn upon my tracks so as to make sure that no spy has followed us, and then when I am satisfied that we can converse with safety I will halt the carriage in some quiet spot and we can discuss the matter without fear of interruption from interlopers."

"The scheme is a capital one and I can't see any reason why it will not work."

And this was the programme that the two agreed upon.

The first part of it was carried out to perfection.

Curly Kid not knowing the intimate relations which existed between the gambler and the Commonwealth avenue lady, had a slight fear that the lady might be afraid to trust herself with a stranger.

Randolph did not think it wise to explain to him that there wasn't the least doubt about her coming in response to any message that he might send.

So on the evening which succeeded the one on which occurred the stirring events detailed in our last chapter, Curly Kid drove his *coupe* to the corner of Charles and Beacon streets.

Prompt to the appointed time, Roxanna made her appearance, coming across the public garden.

The gambler was within the *coupe*, but the front curtains were drawn to so as to evade impertinent scrutiny.

It had now grown quite dark though, so there wasn't much chance for any one to spy successfully.

Curly Kid held the door open for her in true coachman style, and as she entered he took an opportunity to whisper:

"Were you followed, madam?"

"No, I do not think I was. I tried to keep as careful a watch around me as possible, but I did not detect anything to cause alarm."

Then she entered the *coupe*, Curly Kid mounted to the box again, and started the horse.

Down Beacon street to the mill-dam, they went, crossed the causeway and then took the road at right-angles, leading to Roxbury, the highland district.

The master scoundrel kept a wary eye about him as he drove on.

The moon was out bright and full, and the cross-road affording a clear view for a couple of miles, it would have been an easy matter to detect if any spy was on the track, but there was not a single object in sight in any direction.

Curly Kid at last drew rein.

The spot which he had chosen was completely desolate; a better place for such a conference as was about to take place it would have been hard to find.

The desperado got down from the box and opened the door of the *coupe*.

Randolph had explained to Roxanna during the journey that the driver was the man who desired to undertake the task of getting Crowningshield in such an extremely tight place that he would be glad to come to terms.

"You needn't be afraid to speak out freely, madam, there isn't a soul within sight for two miles," was Curly Kid's salutation.

"I presume you understand the nature of the business upon which I come," she said.

"I do."

"That saves time, then."

"This Crowningshield is in your way; he is danger to you, and you wish him silenced."

"Yes, that is it."

"It is a difficult and dangerous job and will cost money."

"How much?" asked Roxanna in a tone devoid of any trace of excitement.

One would have imagined it was a house she was bargaining for, not a human life.

"Two thousand dollars."

"I'll give you five if you succeed and arrange it so that the man can be brought somewhere so that I myself can deal the blow."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

ARRANGING DETAILS.

CURLY KID reflected upon the matter for fully five minutes before he undertook to give an answer.

The offer was a tempting one.

Five thousand dollars does not grow on every bush, nor is it usually to be had for the asking.

The desperado had been in hard luck lately, too, and such a sum of money would be a god-send to him, indeed.

"It will be difficult but not impossible," he said at last.

"You will undertake the job?"

"Yes."

"Here's a thousand dollars earnest money," and she placed a roll of bills in his hand.

There was no mistaking the fact that she was terribly in earnest.

"I will leave all the details to you," she said.

"It does not matter a pin to me how the matter is arranged, except that the man must be trapped, placed in some secure spot so that I will have an opportunity to speak a few words to him before the death-stroke is given."

"I understand, and it shall be performed exactly as you say. Is there anything more?"

"No, nothing," she answered.

"It may take me some little time to arrange a scheme, but when I am ready I will warn you."

There was silence for a few moments.

The lady seemed to be in a brown study and the others judged it wise not to disturb her.

At last she raised her eyes, which had been bent thoughtfully upon the ground, and spoke:

"If I am watched in the future as I have been in the past it may be a difficult matter for you to give me notification without leading to danger of betrayal," she observed.

"I think the spies are removed, now that Crowningshield has recovered his child and if it is so I can easily send you word."

"I will be on the watch for it," she remarked. "Have you any idea how soon it will be?"

"No, it is almost impossible for me to decide in regard to that," Curly Kid replied, slowly, deliberating upon the matter in his mind.

"You see there are so many circumstances to be taken into consideration."

"Yes, I presume so."

"Of course the task is one of the most difficult that could be selected," the gambler remarked, "but from what I know of my partner here I am satisfied that he can do the job if any one can."

"Although he is a stranger to me yet I feel sure of that too," the lady remarked after a careful scrutiny of Curly Kid.

"I'm no greenhorn at this sort of thing," the other observed, "and I wouldn't take the job if I did not feel sure that I could make a success of it."

"But at the first blush it is impossible to fix upon any certain date."

"Yes, understand that. If you were to fix upon a particular day so far in advance, a hundred little circumstances might occur to upset your plans."

"Yes, it would be a far easier matter for me to kill the man outright."

"No, no. That wouldn't answer."

"The lady has a grudge which she desires to settle in person," the gambler observed.

"Yes, that is true."

"I can understand that."

"I wish to see him die!"

"And have him comprehend that it is your hand that has stricken him down," observed Curly Kid.

"Yes, that is the idea exactly."

"It can be arranged as I said; but before I can tell much of anything about the matter, there are certain things that it is important for me to know."

"I comprehend."

"Like the skillful doctor who will not attempt to give an opinion in regard to a patient until he has had a chance to examine him, I must become acquainted with the habits of the man against whom I am to act."

"Certainly, there isn't the least doubt about that."

"Some men are much more difficult to attack than others."

"The careless, imprudent fellow is of course an easy prey, compared to the cool, cautious man who is always on his guard," the woman observed, her keen mind grasping the difficulties of the scheme immediately.

"A week will be time enough for me to ascertain all I want to know, I think," Curly Kid observed.

"Within a week, then, I may expect to hear from you?"

"Yes."

"That is all, then."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE DECISION.

ALL the particulars of the compact being arranged, Curly Kid ascended to the box again, took up the reins, and drove the *coupe* back to the city.

At the lower end of the public garden he halted his steed, and Roxanna alighted, first taking care to assure herself that there wasn't any suspicious-looking personage in the neighborhood, who might be apt to follow her.

Not that there was much danger that any evil would result from any spy discovering who she was, for even if her identity was found out, it would be an utter impossibility for any one to find out the meaning of this mysterious coach ride.

It was a capital idea that Curly Kid had suggested, and by means of the *coupe* the three had been able to hold their conference in perfect safety, and without attracting attention from any one.

There had been only a few words exchanged between Randolph and the woman during the homeward ride.

"Have you confidence that he will be able to carry out his plan?" she asked.

"Oh, yes!" the gambler answered, confidently.

"He has a marvelous head for all such things, and he will be sure to hatch up some scheme that will work successfully. Don't you worry about that."

"It seems almost too good to be true, to think that I shall be able to hold this miserable man in my power, and force him to do my will!" the woman exclaimed, exultantly.

"Well, after you get him, do you really propose to—"

He paused at the last word.

The woman hesitated for a moment before she

replied, and then bending over, a ferocious look upon her face, she fairly hissed:

"Yes—kill him!"

"Take care—take care!" the gambler continued. "Won't that be dangerous?"

"It is the only course open to me—there is no other way. I see you do not understand this man as well as I do."

"All the love that he once had for me has turned into the most bitter hatred; and I've no doubt that he has sworn to punish me for the wrong I did him years ago."

"He doesn't seem to me to be the kind of man that would go out of his way to avenge himself upon a woman," the gambler observed, thoughtfully.

He had been reflecting upon this serious business upon which they had entered, and was rather apprehensive of the result.

If the scheme miscarried in any way, it must result in their all landing in the State prison, and he said as much to Roxanna.

"Bah!" she exclaimed, in contempt, "what greater danger have you to fear than the one you are already exposed to?"

The question was aptly put, and the gambler was obliged to admit that his present situation was about as bad a one as he could possibly get into.

"You are a fugitive, skulking through the streets in a disguise, and you dare not be seen in your own proper person."

"Your companion has for a time thrown the bloodhounds off the track by causing the rumor to be spread abroad in all the haunts of crime that you and he have fled from the city, intending to escape from the country; and so, while the police are watching all the avenues abroad, thanks to your disguises, you are living right under their noses at home; and those detectives who are supposed to be argus-eyed haven't the least suspicion of the truth."

"It is State prison for at least ten years if you are caught, and this man will hunt you down without mercy, and spend money as freely as though it was so much water, to capture you."

"I tell you, you don't understand him!" she repeated, forcibly.

"He is noble and generous to a fault—I admit that. I know him as well as any one in the world does; but for all his open-heartedness, he is one of those men who, when they are once wronged, are inflexible in their desire for justice."

"A man formed on the model of the ancient Roman who sacrificed his own son that justice might be done to the land that gave him birth."

"I shouldn't be surprised if you were right about that," the gambler admitted, for back to his memory came the midnight scene outside of the old mansion, when with revolvers in hand Crowningshield and his friends took Curly Kid and himself so completely by surprise.

"I tell you it is a life and death struggle between us and this man."

"We must put him out of the way or he will have you and your companion in the State prison and not rest satisfied until he has ruined me."

"My position is a dangerous one," she continued, her eyes glaring with baleful fires.

"I do not commit the common mistake of underrating the peril which surrounds me."

"When the judge induced me to leave Crowningshield some ten years ago, he was much differently situated from what he is now."

"Then by a series of lucky strokes he had just acquired his fortune and felt rich and powerful enough to fight the whole world."

"I caught his fancy and he was determined that I should become his wife, no matter what it cost."

"Crowningshield then too was differently situated. He was supposed to be a poor struggling artist, a fellow who would never dare to attempt to contend with such a man as Judge Jones."

"Yes, things have changed since then," Randolph observed.

"Most decidedly they have; Crowningshield, although perhaps not wealthy himself, has plenty of money at his back, while the judge by an unfortunate series of speculations has materially impaired his fortune, and although there isn't much doubt that he will pull through all right in the long run yet he is not in any condition to enter upon a struggle with a man possessed of Crowningshield's means."

"Yes, it would be ugly, for the scandal attached to the affair would be apt to do the judge a great deal of harm."

"In the wild West these little divorce cases don't amount to so much; but when it comes to the sober East, people are apt to look askance at the man mixed up in such an unsavory matter."

"It would surely injure the judge, and he knows it," she remarked.

"He is not so firmly seated as to be able to bear with calmness the blasts of cutting remarks; and he told me yesterday that scandal must be avoided no matter what such a course entailed."

"That is, he would give you up rather than fight for you."

"Yes, he is a coward at heart," she replied, her lip curling in contempt.

"And now that he is brought face to face with the danger that he has so often declared he would face undauntedly, he shows the white feather and wants to retreat like the craven that he is."

"No, no, Randolph, there is but one way out of the difficulty; the danger is before us and must be met and boldly faced."

"We do not get rid of it, you know, by simply closing our eyes so that we cannot see it; it is there all the same, even if we refuse to look at it."

"That's true enough."

"Reuben, that man *must* die; there is no other course open to us."

"With him dead, this persecution will cease, and then we will be able to breathe again."

"But the danger that attends such a step," the other urged.

"Is it any more than perils of a similar nature that we have encountered and triumphed over?" she asked.

"No, I don't suppose it is. You are right; there is no other way out, and Crowningshield must die."

"If Curly Kid can succeed in entrapping him leave me to attend to the rest!" Roxanna exclaimed, a tigerish expression upon her face.

"He'll do the trick if mortal man can," was the gambler's assurance.

At this point the stoppage of the coach put an end to the conversation.

"Do not fail to notify me when the trick is worked," she said, as she descended from the carriage.

"Oh, yes, I will be sure to do that."

Then she glided away and her slight form was soon lost in the darkness.

Randolph looked around, ascertained that the coast was clear, and then got out of the carriage and joined his companion on the box.

Curly Kid started the horses, and again the coach went on.

"She is hot to kill Crowningshield," the gambler remarked, after the vehicle started.

"She's right there; under the circumstances it is the only thing to be done."

"In her opinion it is his life or ours."

"That's about the size of it."

"It is a lucky thing that you happened to have this other old shanty out Medford way, or I don't know what we would have done," Randolph observed, for he guessed that his companion intended to use the house of which he spoke.

"A wise fox always has more than one hole," Curly Kid rejoined.

"The police have caught onto the other place; all my haunts in town are pretty well known to them, and if it wasn't for this hiding-place the chances are about a hundred to one that we would have been nabbed."

"Yes, there isn't much doubt about it; but how do you propose to get at Crowningshield?"

"I've been thinking the matter over and it seems to me that you have laid out a pretty difficult job."

"Well, it won't be an easy one," Curly Kid replied.

"I've been doing a little head-work on that thing, too, and I've come to the conclusion that the simplest way will be the best."

"We will utilize this coupe and abduct the man by main force."

The gambler looked surprised at this statement.

"By Jove! that is a bold game!" he exclaimed.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

ENTRAPPED.

"HAV'N'T I always told you that it is the bold game that wins?" Curly Kid replied, in answer to the exclamation of the other.

"The first thing to be ascertained is in regard to Crowningshield's habits."

"I want to meet him in front of his house somewhere around eleven o'clock. The neighborhood of his house at that time is tolerably lonely and there are not apt to be many people in the street."

"If he is in the habit of going to the club, well and good; on his return we will attend to him."

"If he is not given to going out at night, we must decoy him forth in some way so that we can get a crack at him on his return."

"But I don't exactly see how you are going to work the trick."

"It is just as simple as simple can," the other replied. "Still I suppose it looks complex and difficult to you, for you are not in the habit of taking part in any such scheme."

"We time our bird and then drive up in the coach and halt right in front of his door, taking care to be sure that the street is clear of interlopers, that's the only weak point about the matter; if there is anybody round we can't work the trick, but if we are lucky enough to get a clear field we go ahead."

"I'm a drunken Irish driver on the box, and you're got up as an irritable French gentleman inside."

"You have a card with the direction of

where you want to go written on it, but you are not able to make the drunken driver that I represent understand where you want to go."

"The door of the coach is open, and while we are squabbling over the matter Crowningshield comes up. I hail him."

"Will yer honor please to come and tell me what this French gentleman wants, for it is not the likes of me that kin understand him, at all, at all."

"Naturally he does come, for there isn't anything about the trap to excite any one's suspicions."

"He bends forward in the doorway to look at the card which you hold in your hand, and I seize upon the opportunity to give him a good stiff lick with a sand-club in the back of the head which knocks him senseless into the carriage and into your arms."

"You drag him into the carriage, I shut the door, mount the box and presto! we're off."

"No noise—no outcry—a man passing by on the other side of the street would never have any suspicion that anything was wrong."

"By Jove! the scheme is a colossal one and I don't see how it can possibly fail!" the gambler exclaimed in admiration.

"There isn't any danger of it not working unless luck is against us and there's a lot of people in the street, which will not be likely at such an hour."

"That's true enough."

"Then after we have secured our bird and I am making for shelter—not hurriedly, mind, to excite any suspicions, but driving at a regular pace, you prop him up on a seat and arrange him so that if anybody should happen to glance in he will look as if he was either asleep or in a drunken stupor."

"But it is quite a long drive; suppose he should revive on the way?"

"I have thought of that," the other replied.

"It is one of the peculiarities of my plots that in such a matter as this I generally manage to cover every point."

"You will be provided with a sponge and a bottle of chloroform and the moment he begins to show signs of recovering his senses you will proceed to drug him."

"That is a good idea; I see you have got the scheme perfect in all its details."

"That is the only way to work. And we can arrange the matter so that on the night when we try the trick the woman can be at the old house all in readiness to receive the visitor."

"You see, old fellow, I don't propose to put my head in a halter in this matter. I am eager for vengeance for I want to get square with him for spoiling my little game with the Loy, and I am also equally eager to finger the five thousand dollars which the woman has promised to pay me for doing the job."

"But when it comes to killing Crowningshield, you can count me out on that."

"The woman is thirsty for his blood, she wants to kill, and I will admit I shall feel easier when he is silenced, but I don't care to actually shed his blood myself."

"Oh, she will attend to that; all she asks is the chance to get at the man."

"I'll fix that all right for her."

"But I say," observed the gambler as an idea suddenly occurred to him, "how about disposing of the body after the deed is done so as to cover up the traces of the crime?"

"That point has also been guarded," Curly Kid replied.

"The house is an old one and when a match is applied to it will burn like tinder."

"Yes, that is a good idea, but when the ruins come to be examined the bones will be found."

"That is another point that has not been neglected," the other replied with a quiet smile.

"In the cellar of the house is an old pit which looks as if at some time it had been a well, but it is pretty nearly filled up now so that no water is visible."

"After Crowningshield is done for we can shove the body into the old pit, fill in some dirt on the top of it, and then when the fire reduces the old house to ruins all traces of the deed will be effaced."

"Even when the ruins are cleared away for the erection of a new house, and it may be years before that takes place, it is not likely that the center of the cellar will be disturbed."

"I perceive that you have got every thing down fine and I don't see a single chance of failure."

"No, nor I."

Some few more words of unimportant conversation passed between the two but nothing worth detailing, so we will not weary the reader with it.

They went to the old house put the horse up and then took the steam cars to the city. Curly Kid could personate an Irishman to perfection, and with his carrot-red wig and beard he looked exactly like a son of the Emerald Isle.

He had ascertained that the cook of the Crowningshield mansion was an Irish girl and he watched for an opportunity to speak to her.

It was soon afforded him; the cook came out for a walk and in his most insinuating way he approached and got into conversation with her.

He pretended that he was looking for work.

and that some one had told him that Mr. Crowningshield wanted a man.

This was only an excuse to draw the girl into conversation.

She was rather stupid and the wily-tongued desperado soon contrived to get into her good graces and from the unsuspecting servant he managed to learn all he wished to know.

Crowningshield was a member of a club and on three or four evenings in the week it was his custom to visit the club room and remain there until a little past ten, arriving at home somewhere about eleven o'clock.

This was all that the master scoundrel desired to know and as Crowningshield had gone to the club that evening he set out to watch for him.

A week was allowed to go by before Curly Kid thought that the time had come for the blow to be delivered.

During this time he had familiarized himself with Crowningshield's habits and knew how he usually came home.

The night upon which the scheme was to be tried came at last.

It was quite dark, the moon being new.

The coupe was driven to a by street near the club-house where Crowningshield went, Curly Kid on the box, got up in his Irish disguise and the gambler within rigged out as a Frenchman.

Curly prowled around the club-house until Crowningshield came out and started for home, and then he hastened to the coupe and mounting to the box hurried off to intercept him.

The master scoundrel managed matters so that as Crowningshield came down the street, the coupe came up, the carriage proceeding along quite near to the curbstone, Curly Kid acting the drunken Irishman to the life, peering at all the doors as he came along as though looking for a number.

When Crowningshield was about a hundred yards away, Curly Kid took a quick look around, saw that the coast was clear and then dismounted from the box, grumbling away to himself and approaching the door of the carriage opened it.

"Shure, I can't find it, yer honor; mebbe the house has moved away," he said, using the richest of brogues.

"Aha, you are one jack donkey!" sputtered the supposed Frenchman.

"Can you not read zo card? here is zo address written upon it."

"Shure, I can't read French, yer honor."

"It is not French—it is zo English, you imbecile!"

Just at this moment Crowningshield came up.

"Yer honor, will ye be after havin' the kindness for to find out from this Frinch gentleman where he wants to go?" said Curly Kid addressing the young man.

"He's got a card but sorra a word on it can I make out."

As had been expected Crowningshield fell into the trap.

He approached the coupe and bent forward in the doorway to take the card.

Curly Kid improved the opportunity to deal him a terrific blow with a sand-bag.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE FINAL STROKE.

THE unfortunate young man fell forward into the coupe as if he had been stricken dead.

And the moment that Crowningshield fell, the gambler seized him by the arms and dragged him into the carriage.

Curly Kid shut the door immediately, then jumped upon the box and drove off.

All this took place in far less time than we have taken to detail it.

Away went the carriage at a brisk trot, but the wily scoundrel who had so successfully planned and executed this outrage, did not drive at so brisk a pace as to excite the attention of anybody, as would surely have been the case if he had forced his horses.

Straight for the old house on the outskirts of the town of Medford went the carriage.

Medford is one of the rural towns situated about five miles from Boston, to the northeast, and is more famous for the quality of the New England rum distilled there than for anything else.

The old house, which Curly Kid so graphically called one of his holes, was situated on a by-street, and the neglected garden extended to the bank of the river.

The town of Medford is watered by the Mystic river, and near to the bank of this river the house was situated.

There was deep design in a house so located being chosen, for as Curly Kid explained to the gambler when he first conducted him to it:

"If the cop come at you in front, there's the river in the rear, and I always keep a boat there, and it would be an easy matter to slip down into the harbor while the bloodhounds are employed in breaking into the house."

The place was lonely enough; there wasn't another house within a thousand yards, a desolate, forsaken-looking locality.

The abductors with their prey reached the

house without any trouble, and there they found Roxanna awaiting them.

She had been notified and came promptly in obedience to the call.

There was a cellar under the house divided in the center by a partition and the rear part of it had been fitted up as a sort of a summer kitchen.

A passage and a flight of steps led to the rear yard, and a couple of small windows were designed to afford light, but all were now shut up and guarded by heavy shutters, so that the place seemed like a dungeon.

To this gloomy apartment the senseless form of Crowningshield was carried.

He had recovered from the effects of the blow which he had received, but Randolph had administered the chloroform, and so kept the victim stupefied.

The apartment was furnished in a rough but complete manner.

There was a table in the center of the room, with a common red table-cloth, three or four old-fashioned, high-backed, cane-bottom chairs, and an old-fashioned, horse-hair covered sofa.

Upon the table were a couple of small tumblers and a pint wine-bottle, which bore upon its swelling side, the inscription, "Burgundy."

The two men carried Crowningshield to the sofa and deposited him upon it.

"Now leave me alone with him, and when I want you I will knock on the door which you must fasten after you so that he cannot escape. Have you taken care to remove his weapons?" Roxanna asked.

"Yes, all he had was a revolver," Randolph answered.

"But, I say, Roxanna, ain't you afraid to be left here all alone with him? When he finds out that he is entrapped he may be inclined to be ugly."

"Oh, no," and the lips of the woman curled in contempt as she spoke.

"See!"

And from the bosom she drew a keen-edged, sharp-pointed knife, with a glittering blade fully six inches long.

"If he should dare to attempt violence I would kill him with as little mercy as though he was a mad dog."

"But quick away, for I see he is recovering his senses."

The men hurried from the room, Roxanna replaced the dagger in her bosom, and crossing to the sofa, gazed earnestly upon the face of Crowningshield, who was fast recovering from the effects of the drug which had been administered to him.

"Why not dispatch him now?" the woman murmured, as she gazed upon the helpless man, and then clutched the handle of the dagger.

"But no, he would die without being conscious that it was my hand that stole his life away, and so my vengeance would be robbed of half its sweetness."

"But before he wakes I must prepare the glass for him."

She crossed to the table, drew a long vial from her pocket, and poured a few drops into one of the glasses.

"No one would ever be apt to notice those few tiny drops of colorless, water-like liquid in the bottom of the glass, yet there is poison enough there to kill the stoutest man that ever trod the earth, and within ten minutes, too, after the dose is swallowed, and I will watch him die and gloat over his agony."

"I must be careful, though, not to get the poisoned glass myself."

And as she spoke she pushed the glasses apart, so that she could not mistake one for the other.

Hardly had this been done when Crowningshield rose to a sitting posture, and gazed around him in a dazed sort of way.

"You have met with an accident, and I had you brought here, so that you should not die like a dog in the street," she said.

"There has been ill-blood between us, but I don't bear any malice. Take a glass of wine; it will refresh you. Can you come to the table?"

"I think so, but I am very weak."

He rose slowly and tottered to the table, and sunk into one of the chairs by its side.

"We'll drink to peace hereafter, instead of war," she said, as she poured the wine into the glasses.

"With all my heart," he answered, in an absent sort of way, as though his mind was wandering.

She pushed the drugged glass over to him, and as she did so his eyes began to roll wildly, and he stared at the door.

"What face is that?" he cried.

She was sure his mind was wandering, yet she could not resist the temptation to glance at the door, which was directly behind her.

This was the opportunity which Crowningshield sought, for he had recovered more fully from the effect of the drug than he allowed to be seen, having realized at once that he was in a trap.

With wonderful quickness he changed the glasses, and when she turned her head again, he was still staring at the door.

"There is nothing there; it is only your imagination."

"Perhaps so, perhaps so," the man observed, vacantly.

"Now drink."

He obeyed the command, and both drained their glasses.

"Does that revive you?" she asked.

"It does; I feel a glow in every vein."

"You feel the effects of the poison which you have drunk!" she cried, in triumph.

"Ah! miserable reptile, I am revenged upon you at last! You would hunt me down, but—I—I—" and she paused, for the room began to swim around her and her strength to fail.

"Miserable woman!" cried Crowningshield, the Sleuth, "you have destroyed yourself. I detected your purpose and changed the glasses!"

She would have shrieked, but lacked the power. She gasped for breath, beat the air feebly with her hands for a moment, and then sunk down writhing in the agonies of death.

A few moments and all was over; the guilty soul of Roxanna Merivale had fled to its last home!

Hardly had the woman expired when to the ears of Crowningshield came the sound of a conflict going on up-stairs.

"Great heaven! can it be possible that rescue is at hand?" he cried.

He hastened to the door, beat upon it with his hands, and strove to attract the attention of the men on the upper floor.

The attempt was successful.

The door was opened, and Old Lead Pencil appeared with a squad of policemen at his back.

"I did it, gov'nor!" he cried. "I was a-snoozin' on the Common opposite to your house, an' I see'd him go for yer, then I follered arter the carriage, tracked it out here, and then fetched the police."

Just at this moment his eyes fell upon the body of Roxanna.

With a wild cry, he rushed down the stairs.

"What do I see? Roxy, my gal, dead!"

"Your girl?" said Crowningshield.

"Yes, my darter. I'm Sol Merivale, but I ain't anxious to have it known, though it don't matter much now, I reckon."

And this was the secret of the power which he had possessed over the dead woman.

After the first shock was over, the old man took the matter coolly enough.

"She wasn't no good to me nohow," he said.

With the death of the reckless, willful woman, our story ends.

Old Lead Pencil received a rich reward for the service he had rendered, and took himself off.

Curly Kid and Randolph were sent to State prison for a lengthy term.

And in a week after Roxanna's death, Judge Jones took a sudden flight to parts unknown, leaving behind a legion of creditors.

A year after Roxanna's death, Howard Crowningshield married again, and this time he secured a bride worthy of him, Letitia Hancock, the gentle girl who had been like a mother to Little Goldenlocks, and in her love soon learned to forget the woman who bore within the breast of an angel, the heart of a tiger.

THE END.

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